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ON THE IMPORTANCE OF IDEAS, IDENTITIES AND VALUES IN THE MENA REGION

Nizar Messari

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ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates the importance of ideas, norms and identities in the MENA region. The basic assumption is that ideas, norms and identities matter in world politics in general, and in the MENA region in particular. After presenting an overview of the debate on these concepts in the field of international relations, and their relevance in the non-West, the paper proceeds, based on literature essentially developed in the region and by local scholars, to the discussion of three specific norms in the MENA region: *'Asabiya* as a pre-existing norm that is key to understanding political developments in the region; *Umma* as a norm that has been revisited and redefined in order to be useful in the region; and nationalism as a norm adopted from the West which has had to be adapted to the needs and developments in the region.

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INTRODUCTION

The focus of Work Package 2 (WP2) is on ideational factors and their impact on decision-making and the evolution of the regional order in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The central assumption is that ideas matter, and they matter "all the way down" (Wendt 1999:135). How agents conceive their identity, the structure within which they behave, what their interests are and who defines them, all have a major impact on how they act and how they defend their interests. For the purpose of this Work Package, we will therefore put aside the material factors as explanatory variables for our analysis, not because they are not relevant but because they will be the object of analysis elsewhere in this project.

The objective of this background paper is hence to provide the common theoretical and analytical framework of the WP2, as well as the concepts that will be used and referred to throughout the different outputs of the Work Package. Indeed, and besides the present background paper, three major reports are to be produced within the framework of the WP2. One report will deal with nationalism and the narratives that compete with it, and ask whether nationalism is still relevant today. Another will deal with the relations between religion and politics in the region and focus on social changes and new forms of religiosity in Muslim societies. A third will focus on identities and will situate them in the global context.

Taking norms and identities more seriously is by no means a new undertaking in the field of International Relations, and the objective in this discussion is to shed more light on the ways in which ideational factors have impacted politics in North Africa and the Middle East historically and have the potential to do so in the future. The question to be answered here is not whether ideational factors have an impact on the development of the regional order in MENA or not since, as we said, our working assumption is that they do. Instead, our concern here is to inquire into how these ideational factors are expressed (in similar ways or in differentiated patterns) and how they become relevant in terms of their impact on political decisions shaping the regional order in MENA.

In order to do so, we try to answer the following questions: what ideational factors are we referring to? How are they articulated, defended and internalized by actors? Are these ideational factors the same all over the region or do they vary across sub-regions?

In order to answer these questions, the first step in this paper is to define ideas, norms, culture and identities according to the existing literature. The second step is to evaluate and then indicate how these concepts are translated in the Middle East and North Africa. Particular attention is given to concepts such as ʿAsabiya, Umma and nationalism.

1. DEFINITIONS OF NORMS, IDEAS AND IDENTITIES

Religion and culture are very often referred to in order to explain and/or justify political attitudes in the Middle East and North Africa. Authoritarianism and the compatibility or not of Islam with democracy and what is referred to as a universal definition of human rights are said to be due to a supposed identity and culture in the region. Consequently, the MENARA project has opted to explore

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the importance of norms, ideas and identities in the Middle East and North Africa. When defining these key concepts of WP2, and before referring directly to the region, it is relevant to discuss how these concepts are commonly understood in the existing literature. A good place to start is with Alexander Wendt (1999:135), who affirms that "interests are […] constituted in important parts by ideas." Wendt (1999:122) affirms that "interests are themselves cognitions or ideas" and emphasizes two mechanisms through which they are socially constructed: socialization and deliberation. Socialization and deliberation play key roles in acquiring these ideas, prioritizing them and defending them. Here, Wendt (1999:130) stresses the importance of the social construction of interests beyond the material factors that can stand behind them and reaches the conclusion with Rosenberg (whom he quotes) that "interests are beliefs about how to meet needs."

As for culture, there is ample debate about its importance in international politics. Culture as a concept made a comeback in the field of International Relations (IR) in the early 1990s and has since remained one of the key concepts in the field, at least among scholars who consider ideational factors to be relevant. While this comeback was illustrated by the edited volume by Yosef Lapid and Friedrich Kratochwil (1996), the more recent book by Richard Lebow (2008) is very likely to be considered a key contribution to the debate about the importance of culture in IR. In this paper, the more traditional definition by Wendt is used as a basic reference and starting point. Indeed, Wendt defines culture as beliefs put together with "collective representations or knowledge," that is, "knowledge structures held by groups which generate macro-level patterns in individual behavior" (Wendt 1999:161).

Finally, both Wendt and Nicholas Onuf, scholars supporting significantly different strands of constructivism in IR, define norms in terms of their causal and constitutive effects. Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink (1998:891) define a norm as "a standard of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity," and these actors can be state as well as non-state actors. Justin Morris (2005) distinguishes between two different models of norm establishment. He calls the first one "norm innovation" and partially bases it on Finnemore and Sikkink's concept of "norm entrepreneurs." Morris prefers "norm innovation" to "norm entrepreneur" because he argues that the use of entrepreneur might lead to consider the agents to be self-interested in the norm they promote, with which he disagrees. According to him, norm innovators are not necessarily self-interested in a new norm, but they direct their establishments, defend them and promote them in international society (Morris 2005). The second model presented by Morris (2005:268) is "a more organic process whereby particular modes of behaviour become enshrined in social life by way of convention. Such conventions are not negotiated, but rather develop over time as practices which reflect a general sense of common interest."

Finnemore and Sikkink (1998:891) distinguish "between regulative norms, which order and constrain behavior, and constitutive norms, which create new actors, interests, or categories of action" and insist on adding prescriptive norms which tell actors what they should or should not do, that is, what is expected from them and what they are not supposed to do. Norms can have two different types of impact that are particularly relevant in the analysis carried out by this project, for reasons that will be explored later: on the one hand are what Finnemore and Sikkink (1998:905) call "norm cascades," and on the other hand, what Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink (1991:93) call "boomerang." The former refers to the discussion Finnemore and Sikkink hold on what they

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call the life cycle of a norm, in which the second stage is the process through which an idea is accepted as a norm before it is internalized, whereas the latter refers to the use by local non-state actors of international pressure on their respective states in order to force them to accept an international norm. Moreover, according to Finnemore and Sikkink (1998:891), norms possess a quality of "oughtness." This is what helps us to identify them. When there is a broad enough group consensus on the "goodness" of an idea, then it becomes a norm. "By definition, there are no bad norms from the vantage point of those who promote the norm" (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998:892). Norms are believed to be "good" by those who promote them. If it is not seen as good, then a norm cannot be established, because norms require justification. A few years later, Sikkink (2008) weighed in on the debate about norms development but added a discussion of normative consequences, in particular in moral terms. Particularly interested in norms related to human rights, Sikkink (2008:89) argues that norm development cannot be separated from the empirical evaluation of their potential consequences. This discussion is complemented by Finnemore on two relevant issues: clashing norms and the subject of norms. According to Finnemore (2008:199), norms might not only overlap, but there might be tensions between two opposing directions. The example Finnemore proposes is that of the clash between humanitarian interventions and self-determination. Finnemore (2008:203-4) also affirms that the understanding of who are the "humans" who should be protected by interventions has evolved over time and according to context. If, in a historical moment, those protected by norms of intervention were necessarily Christians, the object of norm protection through intervention has evolved to include not only non-Christians, but also individuals and societies that do not share the values of those who intervene.

This is why it is relevant to note that Nicholas Onuf (2016:123), in a recent article, argued that "rules and norms perform a constitutive function – with language as a rule governed activity, they contribute to the ongoing social construction of reality," and he added that

> most constructivists hold norms to be formless (and their existence not contingent on their articulation), as such exhibiting the shape-shifting properties of fluids and gases. They are "in the air"; like ideas and expectations, they flow and float, if not always freely; they can take, or be given, specific, regime-relevant form as principles, rules, and procedures. Most importantly, they get into people's minds through a mysterious process called internalization and then manifest themselves as proper or appropriate behavior through another mysterious process called socialization (Onuf 2016:123).

It is Amitav Acharya who allows us to establish the link between norms and studies of regional orders in general, and of the MENA region in particular. In fact, Acharya's contribution provides the main theoretical concepts that frame the work of the current background paper and WP2 as a whole. He identifies two features for a theory of what he calls "region building" to be considered ideational: "first, ideas must be shown to have a significant causal and constitutive influence" (Acharya 2012:185), and second, "a non-rationalist epistemology is a key requirement of an ideational perspective on regions" (Acharya 2012:186). In sum, regions are not pre-given or natural; rather, they are socially constructed and the result of social interactions, among leaders as well as among peoples, as Acharya puts it. Acharya (2012:193) identifies three ways in which regional orders are shaped by ideas: "first, the pre-existing ideas (or 'cognitive priors') of individuals or societies [...] can be the foundation around which regional orders may develop," then he adds the

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"subsequent redefinition and broadening of initially present and accepted normative structures leading to the development of new norms" (Acharya 2012:194). Third, there is "the mimicking and emulation of entirely outside ideas" (Acharya 2012:195).

Acharya's main contribution to the discussion on norms is on the two-way norm diffusion process: although much has been said about how global norms are diffused locally, and are accepted and internalized, even by materially non-powerful actors, little has been said about how local norms become global. To do so, Acharya introduces two concepts which emphasize local agency: localization and subsidiarity (Acharya 2012:201). Localization is when "active construction [...] of foreign ideas by local actors [takes place], which results in the former developing significant congruence with local beliefs and practices." Acharya's definition of subsidiarity is that it is a "process whereby local actors develop new rules with a view to regulate their relationships and legitimize common global norms that are at risk of neglect, violation or abuse by powerful and central actors." Its aim is to make local ideas support and strengthen universal norms. Localization and subsidiarity can complement each other or they can work in tandem. Finally, according to Acharya (2012:206), "norm subsidiarity may involve international and trans regional feedback and extensions of locally developed rules."

The debate on identity was also almost absent from the field of IR until the late 1980s and early 1990s. Up until then, scholars considered interests to be the main concept and the main issue to be analysed in IR. But with the end of the Cold War and the multiplication of ethnic conflicts and wars, as well as the resort of several players to what has since been called identity politics, the field adopted tools to be able to engage in that discussion. What became known as social constructivists were among the pioneers in the debate on identity, as they inverted priorities and started asking questions about identity. As we will see subsequently in the argument of Michael Barnett (1996) regarding the MENA region, before we define interests, and the national interest, we need to define identity. Identities are not pre-given but are objects of a permanent social construction and reconstruction. They can change, evolve and adapt, and as such they are not immutable in time or space. Identities also are not absolute but relational, and they result from relations with the "other." Alexander Wendt, for instance, defined identities as expressing a performative and co-constitutive relation between the "self" and the "other."

For the sake of consistency, and despite the existence of a wide literature on identity in IR – which is discussed in this paper – it may be instructive to start with how Wendt defines identity at both a subjective and an intersubjective level, that is, as an interaction between ideas held by the self and ideas held by the other (Wendt 1999). Wendt distinguishes between four types of identities: personal or corporate, type, role and collective. Type identities, role identities and collective identities "can take multiple forms simultaneously within the same actor [...] but fortunately, most identities are activated selectively depending on the situations in which we find ourselves" (Wendt 1999:230).

The self and the other mutually influence, impact and constitute each other. It was in this context that Wendt and others used the concept of "altercasting," that is, when the self induces the other to adopt another identity and deal with it as if it had that other identity (Wendt 1999:346).

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There is an ample debate in the field of IR about the importance and the centrality of the state and its sovereignty that diverges from Wendt's argument. Jens Bartelson, for instance, made a genealogical analysis of the concept of sovereignty by bringing Michel Foucault's concept of epistemic change to IR. Bartelson (1995:189) argued that the sovereign state changes with changes in "the conditions of possibility" (a Kantian concept), meaning the limits on the ways in which societies can even think about their social problems. According to Naeem Inayatullah and David Blaney, the sovereign state reduces diversity within it, and displaces it to the external realm: the domestic realm is one of homogeneity, whereas the external realm is one of difference. "Rather than supporting openness toward the other or fostering a view of difference as a resource, the intellectual legacy of the [Westphalian] era is a pervasive suspicion of difference;" Westphalia was "an attempt to eradicate difference" (Inayatullah and Blaney 2003:33, 47). This is a somewhat similar argument to Michael Shapiro's (2004), who affirms that the sovereign and Westphalian state homogenized diversity and assimilated difference, thus not allowing it to exist. The nation state system established in Westphalia represents a spatial solution to the challenges brought by difference. In this sense, the politics possible within the sovereign state is quite different from the politics possible in other political communities. In this sense, the sovereign state impoverishes rather than expands the possibilities of coexistence – of security – within it.

Bill McSweeney and Karin Fierke give the concept of identity a central role in constituting security. For both authors, the world we live in is socially constructed and nothing is pre-given, hence implying that everything is in a permanent state of construction and reconstruction. According to McSweeney (1999:16), "there is a choice," which means that identity and security can be built – both as a concept and as a political practice – by using alternative and inclusive means. The result would be the production of alternative images of what identity and, eventually, security are – or might be. To the question of what the national interest is, McSweeney answers that interests and identity are mutually constitutive, and hence, before defining what the national interest is, national identity/identities need to be established. By affirming that identity and interests are in a continuous process of mutual construction and reconstruction, McSweeney (1999:179) is able to argue that "we pursue interests in relation to who we are […] but we cannot know who we are in a vacuum of interests or want;" conversely, "collective identities can exercise a considerable degree of constraint over the options to redefine our interests and to reconstruct our identity."

Further in the debate on social construction, David Campbell (1992) adapted Foucault to IR, and quoted Richard Ashley while defining foreign policy as an "boundary producing political performance" (Ashley 1987:53). According to him, identity construction relies on the relationship with difference, and the relationship with alterity constructs the self. Foreign policy is then not about building bridges and understanding the other, but about constructing walls and separating the self from the other. Foreign policy constructs identity through dealing with the external threat. The external threat justifies the establishment of domestic moral spaces, protected within specific territories from the threat of the foreign.

In sum, the debate on the importance of norms, culture and identities has evolved substantially over the last two decades, and the evaluation of their impact and their relevance has become, as shown in the previous discussion, a key aspect of the debate in the field of IR. In the next part, three concepts proper to the MENA region, based essentially on the discussions proposed earlier in this

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paper, and more specifically on the framework elaborated by Acharya, will be explored. These are *ʿAsabiya, Umma* and nationalism.

2. ON *ʿASABIYA, UMMA* AND NATIONALISM IN THE MENA REGION

In this section, the focus is on specific ideas, norms and identity frames that are relevant in the MENA region. Some of these norms were developed in the region, such as *ʿAsabiya* and *Umma*, whereas others, such as nationalism, were imported from the West and adapted to the local circumstances in the region. All three constitute key categories with which to understand and make sense of the political and social evolution of the MENA region. *ʿAsabiya* provides an explanation for the existence of a "we" feeling in the region, as well as the many expressions of solidarity made by the different actors. It also makes it possible to understand why some of these reactions are not constant, as they might be stronger or weaker in specific, different moments in the region. Both *Umma* and nationalism, in their own ways, allow for an understanding of the variable geometry of the "we" feeling, as sometimes it refers to Arabs, other times to Muslims, and still other times to nation states or even ethnic groups.

Indeed, in a series of publications that became must-reads for scholars interested in the MENA region due to their unique use of and reliance on concepts and categories from IR to analyse developments in the region, Michael Barnett (1996-97) identified three characteristics of the MENA region, all of which have been confirmed in the years since the articles were published. These were: (1) the evolution of the region from acting based on a common identity to the establishment of new rules governed by issues of sovereignty; (2) the hesitation of the different actors between self-help at one extreme and cooperation at the other, and all the options in between; and (3) the fact that some of the most relevant threats to stability and security in the region were not inter-state but intra-state. Barnett affirmed that

> actors with a shared identity can differ over the norms that should govern their relations. The clash between Arabism and Westphalia [...] represented nothing less than a debate over the desired regional order that reflected a debate over the norms that should govern actors with a shared identity. (Barnett 1996-97:600)

Already at that time Barnett was clear about the fact that what he referred to as the shared "constitutive norm" of Arabism/Arab identity did not translate necessarily into shared interests, and very often resulted in rivalries among the different actors. What was valid in the late 1990s is still valid more than twenty years later. In building their own states, Arab leaders ended up feeding "estrangement" rather than unity, and local loyalty rather than a shared "Arab and Islamic community" (Barnett, 1996-97:601).

Religion seems in this sense to play a key role in the Middle East and North Africa. It is the reference point of many actors, and has become so for key and influential political actors in the region, some of which hold power and share it with others, such as in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Morocco, Turkey and to some extent Israel and Tunisia. It is also the reference point of many non-state actors in the region, some of which hold political objectives – such as the Muslim Brotherhood or the organization Islamic State – whereas others do not and are simply calling for a return to the

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spiritual values of Islam as a religion. In practical terms, religion also plays an influential role in the MENA region. It provides the reference point according to which some political and/or cultural decisions are or are not acceptable, for example the role of women in society. What place should be given to religion, and what impact it should be expected to have, are key and relevant questions that the current WP should explore.

In a more recent analysis, Geneive Abdo and Nathan Brown (2016) argue that one of the major schisms in the MENA region is the Shia/Sunni one. They argue that the reasons for such an evolution are the impact of the Iranian/Shia revolution of 1979 and the wars and resulting instability since 2003. Indeed, over the past decade several traditional Sunni regimes have been toppled – or at least threatened – by Shia groups and movements, resulting in a loss of power and prestige among Sunnis and their resistance to such a loss (Abdo and Brown 2016:9). This has generated a heightened identity crisis and thus violent confrontations between Sunnis and Shia. Whether this is truly a religion-based conflict or whether these categories are socially constructed and overblown to serve specific political purposes is a key question that will be explored in this WP.

However, Abdo and Brown (2016) affirm that with the exception of the early period of Islam, Muslims have never reached a consensus or agreed on a single legitimate religious authority. What is new, however, is that if, in the past, those disagreements did not usually translate into the delegitimization of the other creeds and beliefs, nowadays, statements of apostasy against other Muslims are more common, even if they are not in the majority. And while they identify as a potentially democratizing trend the fact that religious authorities are now questioned, they also see in this evolution a reduced legitimacy of traditional religious authorities since these are perceived as corrupt, too close to political power and influenced by it – in sum, politically compromised (Abdo and Brown 2016).

This means that identity issues are on the rise in the MENA region. Hassan Hanafi (2013), for instance, argues that the concept of identity in Arabic is significantly different from the situation in other languages. Hanafi starts from the concept of identity in Arabic – "*huwyia*," whose root, according to him, is "*hua*," or he – to affirm that in the Arabic language, to speak of identity is to speak of the other and not of the self, which runs counter to the Schmittian or Foucauldian understanding of what identity is.

This debate brings us to the question of the relation with the other in general, and the West in particular, in North Africa and the Middle East. From an empirical point of view, there is simultaneously fascination with – and an attempt at emulation of – the West, and a rejection of that same West. Here, the concepts of "norm cascades" and "boomerang" developed by Sikkink and Finnemore, which refer respectively to the internalization of a norm in what these two scholars called the life cycle of a norm, and the use by local non-state actors of international pressure on their respective states in order to force them to accept an international norm, are good examples of the links between the previous discussion on norms and identity and their relevance in shaping the regional order in MENA. Acharya's three ways in which regional orders may be shaped by ideas are also relevant and useful for the research to be carried out in this WP. As a reminder, Acharya distinguishes among three ways in which ideas shape regional orders. First, the pre-existing ideas of individuals or societies can be the foundation around which regional orders may develop.

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Then, and as explained in more detail previously, Acharya sees a potential for the redefinition and expansion of existing norms which results in the development and establishment of new norms. Finally, the third way in which norms shape regional orders is through the mimicking and reproduction of external norms, with or without their adaptation to local realities. The three concepts that fit these three ways in which norms impact regional orders as developed by Acharya are ʿ*Asabiya, Umma* and nationalism.

The first way in which norms shape and impact regional orders, according to Acharya, is through the resort to pre-existing ideas and norms, such as Ibn Khaldun's development of the ʿ*Asabiya*. Although the concept of ʿ*Asabiya* has been linked to Ibn Khaldun, it existed long before he articulated it and was used by actors and philosophers alike before him. The term ʿ*Asabiya* has been translated as "kinship" by several scholars who have referred to Ibn Khaldun, considered the father of Sociology. It refers to a "we" feeling that links those who are part of a family or a tribe while separating them from those who are not, which translates into terms of belonging, solidarity and legitimate authority of the leader or supreme representative of the ʿ*Asabiya*. Mohammed Abed Al Jabri (2011) defines it as the natural readiness of individuals to support and help those who are closely linked to them, and the closer the links are, the stronger the support is, the strongest links being those of blood. He also affirms that it is important to distinguish between a private understanding of ʿ*Asabiya* and a more public one. The former holds members of the same families and tribes together, whereas the latter exists among members of communities based on broader terms, such as in cities or states. Al Jabri argues that for Ibn Khaldun, the state is the natural extension in space and time of a certain type of ʿ*Asabiya* (Al Jabri 2011).

According to Al Jabri (2011), ʿ*Asabiya* distinguishes pastoral societies from urban ones in the sense that it plays the protective role of gates and walls in urban settings. In a reminder of what Finnemore and Sikkink refer to as the life cycle of norms, Ibn Khaldun talked about what could be referred to here as the life cycle of an ʿ*Asabiya*: ʿ*Asabiyas* are articulated/born, they grow and expand, thus bringing strength and diversity to those ruled by the ʿ*Asabiya*, and they eventually weaken and disappear. Indeed, the more diverse the people are, the harder it is to rule them since the links of ʿ*Asabiya* become weaker. ʿ*Asabiya* in this sense offers protection from both internal threats and external aggressions (Al Jabri 2011).

A measure of the strength of an ʿ*Asabiya*, any ʿ*Asabiya*, is that strong links both among the people and between the people and their ruler translate into stronger rule. According to Al Jabri (2011), the necessary authority exercised within ʿ*Asabiya* is both a moral authority and an effective and "material" authority of dictating the rules and implementing them.

The second way in which norms shape and impact regional orders, according to Acharya, is through the redefinition and broadening of existing ideas, such as in the case of *Umma* and its historical redefinitions in terms of a Muslim *Umma*, then an Arab one and eventually back to a Muslim one again. Indeed, from a historical perspective, and over the last hundred years or so, moments of self-reference in terms of identity to a Muslim nation were replaced by subsequent moments in which the debates in the Middle East and North Africa were dominated by Arabism, before the region moved back to the *Umma* referring to Muslims. In terms of the agent-structure debate, this corresponds to the fact that the fading consensus around Arabism has been replaced by a new

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consensus around Islamism.

Umma, which can literally be translated as "nation," is in this sense the materialization of the public – that is, broader and more encompassing – understanding of ʿ*Asabiya*. Its definition and reach was by no means limited to Arabs. Thinkers such as Jamal Al Deen Al Afghani and Muhammad Abdou were among the first to define and stand for a Muslim nation. According to them, the Muslim *Umma* should be understood in broad terms and should include all Muslims, without distinguishing them according to specific criteria and beliefs. According to this school of thought, the most important distinction should be between *Dar Al Islam and Dar Al Harb*, the former being the house or realm of Islam, within which peace and order should prevail, whereas the latter referred to the land (or lands) of non-Muslims, against whom – depending on one's interpretation – war was a possibility or even a duty. According to Abdelatif Hassani (1991), this distinction is based not only on a specific religious interpretation of Sharia', but also on the political actions of Muslim leaders throughout history. In a reading of one of the leading Maghrebi historians, Al Nassiri, Hassani shows how that distinction was a driving motivation for the actions of Muslim leaders for several centuries in what we refer to as the Maghreb.

Albert Hourani (1991), in his classic *A History of the Arab Peoples*, shows how the concept of *Umma* was re-interpreted in the twentieth century to refer to Arabs rather than Muslims. Significantly, this re-interpretation did not eradicate the reference to Muslims in general as much as it established a new reference point to the *Umma*. It is revealing that it was a Christian from Damascus, Michel ʿAflaq, who was among the first theorists to defend and argue for a more secular understanding of *Umma* (Hourani 1991): in his writings, ʿAflaq insisted that the challenges facing the region were common to all Arabs, Muslims or not, and that all of them had to act together in order to deal with them. ʿAflaq's writings are the basis of the ideology of the Ba'ath party, which ended up ruling in Syria (and is trying, at the time of writing, to continue to do so), Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan. A parallel but not less potent – although far less sophisticated – interpretation of *Umma* as limited to Arabs, but to all Arabs, independent of their religious beliefs, was the pan-Arab Nasserism which was articulated by Gamal Abdel Nasser (Hourani 1991:406-10). The beginning of the end of this pan-Arab interpretation of *Umma* was the war of 1967, which saw the defeat of Egypt and other Arab states by Israel and the loss of further territories to Israel. Several blows followed that defeat, not the least of which was the resistance of Arab monarchies to Nasserism, and the ideal of Arab unity eventually faded away.

Several scholars consider 1979 – which started with the success of the Islamic revolution and the fall of the regime of the Shah in Iran and ended with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan – as a key turning point in the return of political Islam to the forefront of the public debate in the Arab and Muslim worlds. Of course, political Islam had never really completely disappeared, as had been claimed by many theorists and practitioners alike since the beginning of the twentieth century (e.g. Hassan Al Banna), including during what could be called the golden age of pan-Arabism in the 1950s and 1960s (e.g. Sayed Qotb). But political Islam clearly resurged in the 1980s as a key player in the public realm and the political debate in the region, and with it, the ideal of a Muslim *Umma*. From Salafists (Aboullouz 2013) to all kinds of Islamist political activists, including the different denominations and factions of Jihadists (Aboullouz 2013, Lakhal 2008), all refer in one way or another to Muslims as part of the same nation or *Umma*, the main exception being Sufi Islam,

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which, according to Aboullouz, is more spiritual than material, and not based on an exclusive logic of us vs. them. Aboullouz and others (see for instance Hamieddine 2008) also argue that *takfiri* Salafists (those who accuse other Muslims who do not agree with them of apostasy) project a flexible representation of the *Umma*. From their perspective, the duty of fighting apostasy is as important as, if not more important than, the duty to protect their faith from non-Muslims. This means that the *Umma* they refer to is not only their small group but that of all those they ironically consider "former Muslims." Either way, the current definition of *Umma* refers to its religious base and to Muslims in general. Islam here is hence a norm that has a far wider political impact.

The third way Acharya sees norms impacting regional orders is through the mimicking and emulation of ideas imported from abroad, and in the case of the Middle East and North Africa, this is the case of nationalism.

Nationalism is not a new phenomenon in the region. Hourani underlines the existence of nationalist movements in Egypt and Tunisia in the second half of the nineteenth century, whereas Abdallah Laroui (1993) dates it back as far as the 1830s in Morocco, that is, to the first half of that same nineteenth century, and more specifically the period preceding colonialism. These nationalist feelings evolved according to the notion of nation-states newly imported from Europe, and were adapted and internalized quickly as a way to resist alien occupation. Both Hourani and Laroui insist that nationalist movements in the nineteenth century were not necessarily revolutionary but rather were reformist and a form of resistance to the perceived external threat. The same can be said about Turkey and Iran, and with several caveats about Israel, which came to exist formally only in 1948. Still, the bulk of nationalist sentiments flourished in the region mainly in the second half of the twentieth century, coinciding with decolonization. This is not different from the framework of the expansion of the nation states provided by Adam Watson (1992). In the traditional English School of IR and quasi-constructivist argument, Watson defends the existence of an international society, and affirms that it expanded due to mutual influences among the agents (the nation states) and the structure (the international society). According to him, what started in 1648 with the Peace of Westphalia as an exclusively European solution to a European war expanded progressively through different waves. The first of these waves materialized in the western hemisphere when former British, Spanish and Portuguese colonies became independent and claimed for themselves the status, the rights and the obligations of nation states. That wave of expansion was in many ways "natural" since it was mainly descendants of European migrants who rebelled against European nation-states and created new independent entities in the shape with which they were familiar, namely the nation-state. The following expansion took place in two moments. This was the colonization/decolonization move: European states expanded and colonized both most of Africa and parts of Asia, and split them according to the European reality: borders established in Africa and Asia (and in particular in the Middle East) reflected which European state was occupying which territory. In the subsequent moment of decolonization, those recently created entities claimed independence within the borders established by colonialism, and, just like their western hemisphere predecessors, claimed for themselves the status, rights and obligations of nation-states. Now we have an international society built on a principle that was originally European but that is defended, in very nationalist terms, by each member of what Watson calls international society.

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To this purpose, Elias Sanbar provides a useful framework for understanding this evolution in what he sees as an Arab world (Mardam-Bey and Sanbar 2005). He makes use of the concept of "concentric circles" of nationalisms in the Arab world. According to him, nationalist identities in the Arab region are multiple and superimposed. Individuals identify with the state to which they belong and thus express nationalist feelings, but they also identify with feelings of belonging to the "Arab nation," and in some cases to more limited and immediate feelings of belonging to narrower identities. This is reminiscent of Ibn Khaldun's two types of ʿAsabiya, the private and the public, although Sanbar places nationalism at a larger context than what Ibn Khaldun referred to.

CONCLUSION

The focus of this paper has been to underline the central role played by non-material factors in the decision-making and the establishment of a regional order in the Middle East and North Africa. Three norms were emphasized in particular: *ʿAsabiya* as a pre-existing norm in the region; *Umma* as a norm that has been redefined more than once in order to allow for its political use; and nationalism as a norm adopted from the West but adapted to the circumstances of the region. It is also important to note here that, in this region, there are several states and sub-state entities that are either not Arab or not Muslim, or are neither. *Umma* and nationalism allow us to deal with these other realities in the region and challenge the homogenizing discourse that defines the region as being Arab and Muslim.

The three reports to be produced in Work Package 2 (identities, ideas and values) will hence deal with these norms as follows. The report focusing on the competition between national identities and subnational and supranational ones will explore which norms and identities impact which part of the region and will research the effects of tribalism, ethnicity, state-nationalism and pan-Arabism in the formation of modern nation states. The report on religion and politics will explore how sectarianism, political Islam and different forms of religiosity have shaped regional politics. Finally, the report on global identities will explore the links between those identities and local ones, evaluating how identities resist global pressure for change and adaptation.

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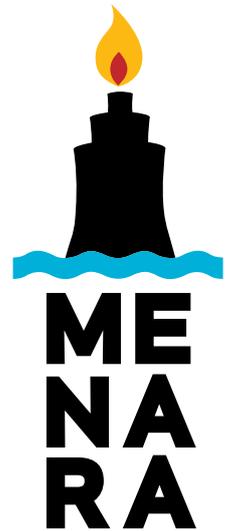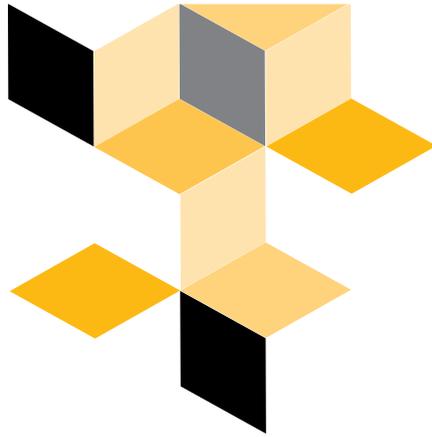
Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture: Mapping geopolitical shifts, regional order and domestic transformations (MENARA) is a research project that aims to shed light on domestic dynamics and bottom-up perspectives in the Middle East and North Africa amid increasingly volatile and uncertain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

MENARA maps the driving variables and forces behind these dynamics and poses a single all-encompassing research question: Will the geopolitical future of the region be marked by either centrifugal or centripetal dynamics or a combination of both? In answering this question, the project is articulated around three levels of analysis (domestic, regional and global) and outlines future scenarios for 2025 and 2050. Its final objective is to provide EU Member States policy makers with valuable insights.

MENARA is carried out by a consortium of leading research institutions in the field of international relations, identity and religion politics, history, political sociology, demography, energy, economy, military and environmental studies.