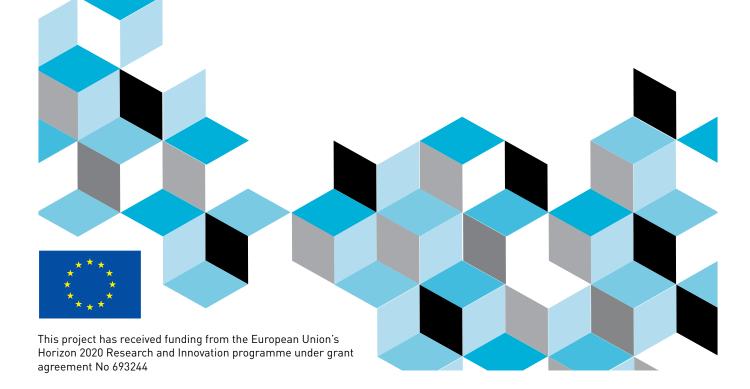No. 1, September 2017

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CHALLENGING THE STATE IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA: THE ROLE OF IDENTITIES

Nizar Messari, **Lorenzo Kamel**, **Zeynep Gülöz Bakır**, **Djallil Lounnas** and **Driss Maghraoui**

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ABSTRACT

Since independence, states in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region have been dominant players in shaping the regional order. The purpose of this paper is to explore and define challenges to the state and their role in shaping identities in the MENA region, and to evaluate their regional roots. The paper emphasizes two key aspects of nationalism in the region. The first concerns the existence of multiple identities and layers of identity that co-exist in the MENA region and which do not necessarily clash with each other. The second is that nationalism and national identities are not a recent phenomenon in the region. This paper shows that there are similarities as well as differences among the three major sub-regions of MENA in terms of the impact of identities at three levels of analysis.

INTRODUCTION

This paper deals with the role that "alternative identities" can play in challenging the identity that the hegemonic national state has established historically, politically and culturally in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Alternative identities are defined as a counter-discourse and a challenge to the dominant ideology of the state in the region. The key question to be answered is: in a state-centred region such as MENA, in which the state has played a key role in the consolidation of national identities since independence, what are the competing discourses that propose an alternative to the notion of identity as embodied by the state?

In order to narrow down the historical dimension of this section, the focus is primarily – although not exclusively – on recent developments, but going back to the early 1980s or even earlier when issues concerning the rise of political Islam became part of the public debate. At a subnational level, references go back even further, to previous centuries. However, current events and the articulation of alternative identities take centre stage.

In this paper, we take a socially constructed understanding of both identity and regional order. Neither of these is considered as given, both resulting from interactions between different players, how these players understand their identity and the regional order of which they are part. As such,

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we take identity and the ensuing regional order to be inter-subjectively defined. The three different representations adopted here (the subnational, the national and the supranational) are not only fluid but also constantly evolving and intersecting with each other. Therefore, it may be seen that this division is adopted only for the sake of clarity, as there are influences between levels.

Our perspective is in line with scholars such as Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, who consider realist categories to be socially constructed – for instance, in their work on securitization (Buzan et al. 1998) as well as in their work on regions and power (Buzan and Waever 2003). Thus, this paper analyses the impact of non-material factors, and more specifically the role of identities, on the articulation of fluid and constantly evolving alternatives to national states in the MENA region, and it does so on three different levels: the subnational, the national and the supranational. This does not mean that these representations of identity are given, rigid or eternal. Besides being a methodological convenience, this approach also allows the perception of deeper trends and more detailed features in the analysis of evolving identities and the impact they have on the regional order in MENA. In sum, identities are fluid and should not be reified and restricted. They are dealt with here in their full complexity, reflecting the overlaps between different categories.

1. TRIBALISM, SECTARIANISM AND ETHNICITY: DECONSTRUCTING SIMPLIFIED VERSIONS OF THE PAST

Out of the three norms which shape the MENA region (*Asabiya*, *Umma* and nationalism) developed by Messari (2016), two apply in the subnational context: *Asabiya* and nationalism. Yet there are several other alleged and/or factual identity-related expressions throughout the region. This subsection focuses on three of the most commonly used ones (tribalism, sectarianism, ethnicity), providing the necessary historical and analytical background to understand and/or deconstruct them.

CONTEXTUALIZING IDENTITIES

"It was an uprising ('Awakening' or *Sahwa*) of Iraqi tribes that had pushed back the growing threat of IS' predecessor in 2006" (Vennekens 2015). Impressions such as this are commonly conveyed in analyses on the contemporary MENA region. They are often mirrored in works that focus on individual countries in sub-Saharan Africa, where "tribes" have historically been depicted using similar types of cliché. For instance, Aylward Shorter (1974: 30) argued that "Few African tribes are so well known as the Masai of East Africa. With their striking physique and noble bearing, they are the obvious choice for the cover photo of a travel brochure or as a symbol of all that is romantic and singular about Africa."

The reference to tribal societies, undermined and criticized by a number of African scholars,[2] is based on a perception defined by outsiders during colonial times. The modern and contemporary use of the concept – tied to classical and biblical/Quranic images (see Al-Sayyid 1984) and with

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2   Zambian historian Mose Sangambo (1979: 91), for instance, noted that "We [Luvale, Lunda, Luchazi, Mbunda and Chokwe] were once brothers at Inkalanyi; we have separated to found different tribes but now we are coming back together again in our new Zambian nations."

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minor points of connection with Ibn Khaldun's original understanding of "*Asabiya*" (the term was already familiar in the pre-Islamic era) – has often been erroneously used to refer to autonomous, uncompromising social units, loyalty to which relies solely on family and blood ties (Yossef and Cerami 2015: 4). It conveys a negative connotation – in a similar manner to the above-mentioned concept of "awakening/*sahwa*", which implies that someone was sleeping – associated with primitiveness.[3] This has been historically functional from the perspective of European powers. For colonialism to take root, in fact, it was deemed important that African peoples and others would think of themselves in terms of small clans and tribes without any collective, or more "elaborated", identity (see Kamel 2015: 176–82). Approaches like this did not successfully represent "the actual activity of the society they depicted, nor were they intended to; they represented only that slice of it that interested the official observer" (Scott 1998: 7). As argued by Stephen Chan (2007: 39–40) in a book based on years of field research in a number of African countries: "It is now possible to say that there were seldom such entities as African 'tribes', except that they were the creations of colonial administration [...] which needed to define, categorize and then administer people, often balancing the interests and benefits gained from one group against another."

Admittedly, concepts such as "tribes" (*qaba'il*) or "tribalism" (*qabaliyya*) do not bear the same negative connotation in the Eastern Mediterranean that they do in the African context. On top of this, they might at times be useful in providing a more "immediate" and "easier" identification of subethnic societal divisions, which also include the *fukhdh* (clan), *khams* (five generations of male heirs) and *beit* (house). And yet the common explicit or implicit reference to a "Middle East's tribal DNA" (Salzman 2008) – more recently used to "explain" New Year's Eve (31 December 2015) sexual assaults in Germany (Molinari 2016) – remains as simplistic as it does problematic,[4] and tends to overlook the fact that the rising of Islam itself (and the *fiqh*, or "Islamic jurisprudence") represented a sort of revolutionary rupture between the pre-Islamic ("tribal") Arab "world" and the following "Arab-Islamic *Umma*". Avoiding terms and concepts such as "tribes" is thus, on the one hand, a way of saying that words matter, and, on the other, a mode of exposing and shedding light on the many occasions when "tribalism" has replaced what in Western countries would have been defined using concepts such as ethnic awareness, extended families, regionalism, kinship groups, ethnic separatism and movements. It is indicative that concepts such as "tribes" and "tribalism" have always been explicitly avoided by European scholars to refer to non-European contexts, despite the fact that Roman *gentes*, migrant populations coming from Central Asia in the 4th century CE, Celtic clans, to name just a few, would easily comply with the category of "tribes".

These considerations appear particularly cogent if we consider that for many centuries "tribal" identities "did not operate in such a rigid and exclusive way" (Ranger 1985: 17): in other words, they were never sealed-off entities. What completely changed in the region (and in most of the rest of Africa) from the mid-19th century onwards was that a previously slowly developing and fluid ethnic self-awareness shifted into a new, harder, "tribal" structure to the extent that "tribalism" was stronger and more politically relevant in 1981 than it was in 1881 (Papstein 1991: 373).

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3 As noted by Gerald Caplan (2008: 14), "There are no tribes in the West; there are nations and ethnic groups. Only primitive, savage societies have tribes."

4 Many peoples, noted David Maybury-Lewis (1997: 45), are "stigmatized as being 'tribal' because they insist on being marginal".

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This is the analytical theme that better links "tribalism" to "sectarianism", or *Tā'ifīya*,[5] a neologism – considered today as an "essentially contested concept" (Haddad 2017: 363) – introduced in Arabic in the 19th century to render the common European concepts ending in "-ism" (Mneimneh 2016). MENA has always been a region in which religious boundaries – as is the case with "tribes" – were shifting, blurred and ambiguous. The minority/majority dichotomy, so fraught with meaning today, is for instance very much the result of newly created mental and physical divisions.

In his *Minorities in the Arab World* (1947), the celebrated historian Albert Hourani defined "minority" simply as a community that was either non-Sunni Muslim or non-Arabic-speaking or both, living within a Sunni Arab majority and with a well-established presence in the region. The alleged existence of separate, clearly identifiable and long-standing minorities persisted for many decades, before being deconstructed and rejected in a number of books published in more recent years (it is fair to assume that a similar process will occur in reference to "tribes" and "tribalism", concepts that have already been rejected by a number of scholars). As noted by Benjamin White (2011: 209), "the nation-state form creates the objective conditions in which people begin to consider themselves as minorities and majorities: however[,] these remain subjective categories". Before the first decades of the 20th century, neither the local populations nor Western powers used the term "minority" (see Sluglett 2016) or "majority" to describe the ethno-religious composition of the region.

It should also be added that belonging to a certain "sect" has been for centuries just one, often secondary, way of expressing one's identity. On top of this, many ethnicities in MENA countries – including Kurds, Azeris and a number of Arab populations across the region – still have Sunni and Shia branches that exist in parallel with sectarian identity. This does not necessarily indicate that communal conflict was historically unknown. Instances of Sunni–Shia violence, for instance, were documented as early as the Middle Ages (see Kamel 2016), but its nature and scope was hardly comparable to more recent times.

The fluid human and cultural "intersections" that for centuries have characterized the daily life of different religious groups and confessions in the region – the shared shrines of the Mediterranean that are still visited today reflects a further example of these "intersections" – have been "covered" by layers of history that are mainly related to the homogenizing effects of nationalism. In this sense it is important to remember that unlike medieval societies, characterized by a range of individual groups, the era of the nation-states tended toward the homogenization of diversities, and this has had a meaningful impact on the MENA region, where religious and identity-related "borders" have been historically much more nuanced than in Europe. As witnessed by French governor of Algeria, Jules Cambon, in 1897, "borders are, nonetheless, ideal [*idéales*]".[6]

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5   Gaiser (2017: 67) noted that early Muslims "tended not to use binary, tertiary, or relational terminology 'church-sect-cult' or 'sect-denomination'), but rather to abstract the main groups using a singular concept […] casting all of them together as firqas".

6   Jules Cambon, Tunis, 11 January 1897, in *Les Archive Nationales de Tunisie* (LANT), Series E; Carton 550 Dossier 5 (1890–1912), folio 35.

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In many documents of the 18th and 19th centuries it is possible to find a distinction between *ibn 'Arab* (Arab son) and *ibn Turk* (Turkish son). This means that local people often considered non-Arabic-speaking Turks to be foreigners. At the same time, origin from a certain village, the *hamula* of belonging and local customs were all factors which marked certain distinctions between the proto-nations that were present in the region. And yet, until a relatively recent past, local "tribes" and "sects" were not in need of clear-cut borders that could divide their *Heimat* – which in German does not refer to one's country or nation, two abstract ideas that are too far-reaching and distant, but rather to a place in which our most profound memories are rooted. However, this should not suggest that the various local fluid regional and religious identities were deprived of any ethnic awareness or peculiar, if not "proto-national", characteristics.

This brings us to the third analytical layer, connected to ethnicity and in general to the several ethnic and other local nationalisms in the MENA region. These ethnic groups hold nationalist ambitions that are sometimes expressed very strongly, as in the case of the Kurds. Yet this case, which is certainly not an isolated one, reveals much about ethnicities and, in general, identity-related aspects. With the possible exception of 17th-century philosopher Ahmad-i Khani, there is no evidence that any Kurd thought in terms of a Kurdish people until the end of the 19th century. There is an almost complete consensus among scholars that the Kurdish people, indicated in several British documents produced in the first half of the 20th century as individuals led by "tribesman",[7] or as "a tribe who keep very much to themselves",[8] has represented an identifiable group for possibly two millennia, but it is equally clear that it was little more than a century ago that they, like Arabs and Turks, acquired an ethnic sense of identity as Kurds. This happened in place of the idea of Ottoman citizenship and membership of a religious community (McDowall 2004: 1–2), and did not result in any clear-cut sense of "political loyalty".[9]

Why, then, did Kurds, like many other ethnic groups in the region, not identify themselves as a Kurdish people until relatively recently? Anthony Smith (2009: 25, 72) provided an indirect answer to this by focusing on the "rudiments of a nation", that is a set of identifiers so fundamental and so long-existing, so taken for granted, that virtually no one thought to investigate it. Meron Benvenisti (2007: 233) went a step further, and noted that "the whole game of identity definition reflects the immigrant's lack of connection. Natives don't question their identity."

These considerations help to better understand the reason why among local peoples in the region different senses of identities (connected to religious, local, transnational, land and family-related aspects) co-existed, without any contradiction between them. They held identities that were both distinguishable and overlapping. As Telhami and Barnett (2002: 19) pointed out, one of the ways in which the entire region differs from others "is that the national identity has had a transnational character".

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7   R.W. Bullard, British Legation, Tehran, 28 October 1942, in *The National Archives* (TNA), FO 624/28/152.

8   Letter from the Nawab of Bahawalpur to the Viceroy and Governor General of India, Lord Linlithgow, 15 December 1941, in *The National Archives* (TNA), FO 624/28/240.

9   When European imperialists tried "to create a Kurdish state at Sèvres [1920], many Kurds fought alongside Ataturk to upend the treaty. It's a reminder that political loyalties can and do transcend national identities in ways we would do well to realize today" (Danforth 2015).

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This transnational character and associated overlapping identities did not contradict a strong attachment to the land. At the same time, this emphasis on the transnational character should not be overstretched and (mis)used to imply that most nations and/or states in the MENA region are "artificial", or recent Western creations. Indeed, a number of local states and nations (in the sense of cultural communities, or, to borrow a term from the Indian context, *Rashtra*) are more ancient and "rooted" than some in the West. Countries such as Oman (where a state was established in 751 CE with its first Ibadi imam), Yemen (state founded in 900 CE by a descendant of ʿAli ibn Abi Talib), or Egypt (state rooted in the ancient Naqada II culture of Upper Egypt), to name but a few, remind us of a millenary and often neglected "statual" background (Al-Qaradawi 1977), while Morocco, Tunisia and others have been nearly independent political units since the 19th century. At the same time, Iraq and Syria (Kamel 2016), but also Palestine (Al-ʿAsali 1990, Al-Barghuti 2001: 76–7) and others, show a deep-rooted "self-awareness" that is lacking in a certain number of European countries. All this is not meant to suggest that local peoples were in need of well-defined borders: when crossing new borders, merchants became, often in the space of a few days, smugglers, labourers were transformed into refugees and goods became contraband. Yet it aims to emphasize that the modern and contemporary Iraqi identity, for instance, has been "imagined" and "constructed" like any other identity in history, and that it is that complex and shared identity – often stronger than sectarian divisions – toward which a considerable majority of the local population (70 percent, according to a survey conducted in 2008 by the Iraq Centre for Research and Strategic Studies) is still looking at today. This further confirms that the main roots of the crises that are plaguing a large part of the MENA region should be found in the lack of inclusive social contracts, and not in the alleged "artificiality" of the region's states or in largely artificial problems connected to "state identities" and state-centred narratives.

2. STATE NATIONALISM IN THE MENA REGION: FRICTION

Nationalism is predicated on the idea that one's state comes first, and therefore one is predisposed to defend its interests and ultimately die for it. Historically, nationalism meant the political changing of the guard and the establishment of new "indigenous" governments in the place of colonial authorities. The task of creating a national distinctive identity came hand in hand with the marginalization of other identities that were constitutive of the nation. The state had to be "imagined" in the singular through the discursive linguistic and cultural task of homogenizing the nation. As an ideology, nationalism is embedded in language as discourse, and this language is constructed not only as part of an internal consumption for the creation of what Anderson (1991) called "horizontal solidarity" but also as a discourse that competes with and is in conflict with the "other".

This paper attempts to tackle contemporary nationalism in the MENA region under two headings: decolonization and state nationalism. In doing so, the following subsections will briefly explore the decolonization process, stating how space for the quest for national identity was opened up and the states' role in consolidating state nationalism, viewing the friction within and without in terms of the broader MENA region. Attention will also be given to state identity and MENA regional order.

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The manner in which states emerged after the end of British and French colonization was not consistent in the Arab world; independence came at different times for different Arab peoples. In the various decolonization projects that took place in MENA, Islam was a common denominator irrespective of other cultural differences. Nationalist demonstrations regarding autonomy began with the National Party in Egypt, Young Ottomans and Young Turks in the Ottoman Empire, Arab societies in Beirut and Damascus, and Young Tunisians. These opened up space for the projection of state nationalism and identity. Arab nationalism therefore became popular. However, Turkish nationalism also grew, with its unique idea about how national communities ought to be perceived; also in Iran, different currents of nationalism imagined different futures for the country (Sheehi 2004).

Nationalist movements began to get off the ground in Egypt during the early 20th century. In 1914, Britain proclaimed its protectorate over Egypt, and this continued until 1936, when Egypt became a formally established state. Although its regime remained a monarchy until 1953, the impact of Arab nationalism was always present. Especially during the Nasserist period, Egyptian nationalism pursued a modern path with a reform programme that was fuelled by Arab socialism, "to voice the aspirations for revival and restored dignity of the Arab masses" (Mansfield 1973: 675). Egypt played a pivotal role in demanding the recognition of Arab dignity and the right of Arab nations to cooperate while forging their own futures. This was notwithstanding the unsettled issue of the Occupied Territories of Palestine and the State of Israel, which became an obstacle for Nasser's government. Nasser and his successor Anwar Sadat embarked on a modernization project that was met with opposition from Islamic conservatives, resulting eventually in the latter's assassination in 1981 by Islamist extremists (Al Jazeera 2008).

In Iran, the opening up of space started with popular unrest against the shahs, merchants and the Shi'ite clergy (*ulama*), giving birth to a revolt. Subsequently Reza Khan, who established a government through a coup and confirmation by the *ulama*, began to modernize Iran. Subsequently, deepened repressive tendencies and the failed policies of observance of Islamic tenets, alongside extended support for Palestinians, furthered by stopping oil flows to Israel, paved the way for Ayatollah Khomeini, who set off an Islamic revolution that led to the creation of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Tabari 1981). In Turkey, the birth of nationalism dates back to the 19th century, gaining momentum following the foundation of the Republic of Turkey. From that point, Turkey underwent a sweeping programme of modernization based on secularist state ideals. In this context, these two countries' quest for their own "revolutionary" ideals regarding identity formation could be best discussed as aspects of state nationalism.

2.1 STATE NATIONALISM IN THE ARAB COUNTRIES

Individual states in the MENA region each played distinct roles in fomenting state nationalism. The modern trajectories and nuances of Turkey, Iran and Israel may be drawn upon in order to comprehend how each state plays significant roles in nationalism consolidation.

It could be said that the modern Middle East had four key processes that transmogrified its politics: state formation as an administrative and coercive political actor, the creation of national identities, secularization, and growing resistance to colonial external and regional powers through ethno-

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nationalist and Islamic movements (Halliday 2009).

The state, however, remained the central player in terms of pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism. There is, though, an uneven trajectory for "the nation", "the state" and "the nation state". Historically, within the newly defined modern MENA, there are some states that pre-date the Ottoman and pre-colonial period, such as Iran. The rise of nationalism as an ideology in MENA is portrayed in two major forms: the nationalism of particular ethnic groups and individual states, thus, Arabs and non-Arabs; and the cultural form of Arab nationalism, which transcends individual state identities to claim a collective identity and regional identity, for instance pan-Arabism.

Looking at this in historical terms, the Arabs were united under the ideology of Arab nationalism against the colonial powers and the Ottoman Empire, which prompted an Arab revolt en masse. Hourani opines that the widespread mode of nationalism in the Middle East was largely territorial (state-wise/state nationalism) until the 1940s, and subsequently became ethnic (Hourani 1981: 186).[10]

Pan-Arabism, on the other hand, was a significant "force of resistance during the anti-colonial movements" (Göl 2015: 389). Essentially, "pan-Arabism by its nature" aimed to be the threshold of "Arab unity, threatening the sovereignty of the new fragile borders" (Gonzalez-Pelaez 2009: 94, Göl 2015: 389). It must be noted, however, that pan-Arabism also "strengthened the principle of sovereignty because gaining independence from colonial powers was a necessary step towards statehood", and thereby it prompted the consolidation of individual state nationalism (Göl 2015: 389).

There is no doubt that nationalism played a significant role in the process of state formation in the MENA region, but critics of Islam say there can be no division between religion and nationalism in Muslim societies. Related to this, one can postulate that Islamic nationalism becomes a central source of friction in the MENA region. Emphatically, Islam does not condone ethnic inclinations and "therefore acts as nationalism because of the unitary nature of the Muslim community (umma)" (Göl 2015: 389). Buttressing this, the ideological perception of pan-Islamism has been historically vibrant in its advocacy of a unitary brand of the Muslim community, in effect supporting claims of Islamic nationalism (Göl 2015: 390).

In the context of Egypt and Libya in terms of the Arab uprisings, the latter was an entrenched nation-state with formidable nationalistic inclinations among the populace. The "Day of Rage" unleashed political ideologies that were premised on secularist nationalism and Islamic nationalism, culminating in the forging of a government that would provide accountability for Egypt's diverse people. Libya, on the other hand, was a recently constructed state with intense inter-tribal and inter-regional tensions, and a lack of nationalistic inclinations among the populace. Tribal (ethnic)

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10 "In the years between 1900 and 1940 there were two different types of national ideas (which could, however, live together in any particular national movement). On the one side stood the nationalism which was linked with a specific piece of land, and on the other that which was linked with a group possessing some kind of cultural, ethnic or racial unity. In general, the Persian, Turkish, Egyptian and Lebanese nationalism of this period belonged to the first type, Arab nationalism to the second. But to say this is to simplify too much. It was only slowly that modern Turkish nationalism emerged from a movement of the second type, Pan-Turanism; and by 1940 Egyptian territorial patriotism was changing into Arab ethnic nationalism" (Hourani 1981: 186).

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and regional subnational inclinations were vying for control of all or parts of the country.

Nationalism in the Maghreb countries goes back to the early 1830s and is still present today. This early development of nationalist ideas is an important differentiation between Morocco and Algeria and other countries in the Arab world. The Maghreb is a region of intersections between Arab countries in the south and the European zone in the north. These two regions have had a significant impact on the Maghreb residents, including the Amazigh inhabitants, and on the politics of the region. Colonialism has therefore been an important part of the political agenda (Lauermann 2009: 44). Being one of the oldest inhabitants there, the Amazigh population plays an important role in the development of nationalist politics in the region. Nationalist ideas were then opened up to resist colonialism and fight for independence from French colonialism. The Amazigh movement both in Morocco and Algeria become seriously politicized, as opposed to its cultural characterization in the immediate post-independence period. It has been a part of influential national and regional movements for democratic reforms, such as the Arab uprisings. We see, though, that both Morocco and Algeria withstood these uprisings. Morocco launched a new constitution that gave birth to the election and formation of an Islamist government, while Algeria had embarked on reforms to address some of the grievances of protesters decades earlier (Layachi 2015). In Morocco and Algeria, no breakthrough development has occurred since the uprisings, and the protests "failed to crystallize into any larger social or political protest movement" in these countries (Maddy-Weitzman 2015: 2508).

The Arab uprisings therefore signified that "if a country is a nation-state, then there can be repeated regime change and transition but [...] the country stays together, even through cycles of disillusionment and more protest", as witnessed in Egypt (Ellison 2015: 2). However, if the rupture ousts a dictator who ran a state without a vibrant national identity before his reign, then the transition stage can suffer violent conflict and the possible break-up of the state, as witnessed in Libya (Ellison 2015: 2).

The Syria conflict, which began in 2011, added a new twist to Syria's nationalism. Since its independence from France, Syria had undergone certain periods of political instabilities and military coups motivated by Arab nationalism. To that extent, it was among the countries where Arab nationalism was more present and influential in politics (Bērziņš 2013). What is clear is that increasingly the Syrian opposition began to chant more nationalistic slogans, such as "Syria for Syrians", taking on board Arab nationalism whereby Syria is premised as an Arab nation. The pan-Arabist faithful opine that the fight in Syria is about the survival of the Arab nation and not necessarily about Assad's survival (Harbi 2014). They add that they are defending Arab nationalism just as they "fought in Libya [and Iraq] against NATO through the Arab Defense Forces, and in Iraq against the US invasion, and in Gaza against the Israeli occupation forces through the Arab Resistance Brigades and of course the [Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine] PFLP" (Harbi 2014). The transformation of Syria's state nationalism has been slow,

> with the gradual inclusion of increasingly nationalist symbols under Hafez al-Assad, a shift to increasingly more nationalist symbols under Bashar al-Assad, and the culmination of this transition to Syrian nationalism displayed by the numerous groups opposed to the Assad regime. [...] The regime's gradual adoption of new symbols and the opposition's

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adoption and rejection of certain symbols indicates an active process of identity formation and reformation. (Gilbert 2013: 82)

2.2 THE CASES OF TURKEY, IRAN AND ISRAEL

Compared with other MENA countries, Turkey, Iran and Israel illustrate different courses of nation-state building processes. In particular, "Turkey and Iran constitute [two] of the most important and interesting cases [that] demonstrat[e] how nationalism has been able to maintain its presence both ideologically and politically in modern times" (Keyman and Yılmaz 2006: 425). These countries illustrate alternative identities to the other MENA region states and their dominating identity of Arab nationalism.

While looking at the nationalist discourse in Turkey, we should look at its roots in the Ottoman Empire. At that time, Islam used to provide the necessary link between imperial centralized power and the Muslim people. Political authority was legitimized through this religious tie. With the radical secularizing reforms of the Turkish Republic in the first decades of its establishment, this tie was removed, and secularist-oriented Westernized norms were privileged over the Islamic norms of the masses (Mardin 1973, Altınordu 2014: 1).

During the first decades of the Turkish Republic, Atatürk, its founder, played a central role in orchestrating the political and social change that constituted the Turkish revolution (1918–27), which led to the birth of a new kind of Turkish identity. This new identity was built on secular and Westernized norms with Islam being put on the back-burner. Kemalism introduced reforms that sought to "replace the religious identification hitherto prevalent amongst the Turkish population with a national identification" (Waxman 2000: 8). A tension between Turkey's secular and conservative groups has always been present in political and social public discourse, and has been an element of the nationalist discourse since then.

It may be argued that the relationship between the centre and the periphery is the key to understanding political polarization in Turkey. The asymmetrical struggle between the urban, educated, Westernized secular centre, with its political power base in the military, judicial, and civil bureaucracies, and the pious periphery of the countryside, small towns and migrant neighbourhoods in urban areas, for whom Islam plays an important role and who find their political representation in conservative and religious parties, has constructed two polarized groups: the centre (secular) and the periphery (conservative) (Mardin 1973, Altınordu 2014: 1).

Islam was deeply rooted in the fabric of society, so Kemalist reforms could only lean towards the nationalization of Islam, and this was juxtaposed with the Islamization of Turkish nationhood, which had a significant effect on its identity. The idea was that Turkish people should view themselves as belonging to the Turkish nation, Islamic faith and Western civilization (Yılmaz 2008). Since the late 1990s, Turkey has witnessed a period of massive transition, which has also influenced its identity. In this context, Muslim identity in the country is no longer being undermined and has gained ground in the public sphere. Yet polarization is still present between diverse groups in Turkey, and although this appears with apparently different motives, such as religion, ethnicity, ideology and nationalism, it is given wide public coverage in terms of Islamic morality.

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Nationalism was in evidence in mid-19th century Iran, but it was not at the centre of the key debates at that time; instead, modernization and nation-state formation processes were on the agenda of the Pahlavi regime. Nationalism, however, can be considered to be an extension of the nation-state building process and was strongly advocated by Persian intellectuals. Their ideas also influenced the ideological basis of the 1906 Iranian Constitutional Movement and fuelled the secularization and modernization efforts in Iranian society until the Islamic Revolution of 1979 (Abdolmohammadi 2015: 6–7). Recent history in Iran has witnessed two authoritarian regimes, a monarchy – the Pahlavi dynasty – and a theocracy – the Islamic Republic. The Pahlavi regime vouched for Persian identity and projected a secular Iran with a single language for all the diverse ethnic groups amidst anti-Arab sentiment. The Islamic Republic, on the other hand, stresses the tenets of Fiqh and Sharia and major Islamic figures. Whilst the differences between these two ideologies are clear, many Iranians are both nationalistic and Islamist. Under the Pahlavi regime Sharia law was the official law of the country, whilst under the Islamic Republic racist laws that fostered discrimination, especially against Kurds, held sway. Both groups are very nationalistic in that they try to project two versions of a beautiful Iran. Most nationalists abhor the notion of Iran being an Arab country (Shahidsaless 2016).

During the reign of Mohammed Reza Shah (1941–79), Iran was passing through a top-to-bottom modernization project, and in that regard the pre-Islamic dimension of Iranian national identity came to the fore, the clergy being portrayed as "a backward class and an obstacle to the reforms" (Keyman and Yılmaz 2006: 433). The Islamic Revolution in Iran took place between 1977 and 1979, during which the conservatives aimed to Islamize Iranian nationalism by bringing the religious dimension to the forefront (Keyman and Yılmaz 2006: 433). With the 1979 Revolution, the clergy tried to transform secular Iranian nationalism into an Islamic community. Post-revolutionary politics was therefore dominated by religio-nationalism, which was fuelled by anti-Western and anti-American emotions.

However, during the late 1980s there has been a revival of nationalist discourse, emphasizing the desire for social, economic and political reforms. It should be noted that the regime had always incorporated a nationalist discourse since its establishment; what changed were its form and priorities. Owing to constant confrontation between conservatives and reformists, the reform process was carried out with limited success during the late 1980s. Ever since the Iranian military operations in the region, Iranian nationalism has been closely tied to security concerns and influenced by external factors (Keyman and Yılmaz 2006: 434).

Tension between conservatives and reformists, and also the populist group of hardliners, still plays an important role in domestic affairs in Iran. For instance, former Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad stressed "nationalist" and populist Iranian themes in 2010 to forge a new political constituency among those who identified with their religious tendency irrespective of whether they were conservatives or reformists. Lately, the populist discourse that Ahmadinejad primarily used focused on the creation of Iran as an independent country that stood alone, free from external forces, and with a welfare state that provided support for the underprivileged and relatively religious segments of society. To that extent, while considering the impact of nationalism in today's Iran, the lines between nationalism and populism might be blurred.

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Radical changes following the 1979 revolution in Iranian politics affected the way in which national identity was made up. While secular nationalism was dominant in the political scene until 1979, the Islamization of national identity became the primary determinant of being Iranian in the post-Islamic revolutionary period (Keyman and Yılmaz 2006). It can be surmised that at present the Islamic Republic is witnessing a domestic generational change which might alter its political future. The younger generation has welcomed the notion of secularism and nationalism in trying to advance its political objectives. The opposition could comprise both secularists and Islamic democrats. In fostering a national Iranian identity, both groups favour a democratic state, the separation of religion and politics, and the protection of all minorities (Mousavi 2014), as well as freedom of expression.

Zionism dates back to the late 19th century, and accelerated in the form of a reaction to the anti-Semitic discriminatory movements in Europe. With the re-establishment of the Jewish homeland in Israeli territory, state nationalism was turned into a defence of Israeli borders and identity. Essentially, the declaration of the state of Israel as a Jewish state worsened the rift between the two identities, namely Israeli and Palestinian, that were striving for self-determination within the same piece of land.

Significantly, Israel's sixty-one years of existence have been threatened by wars and violence – an existential battle – whilst Palestinians have been exiled, lost land or have been subdued under Israeli occupation. Both sides have experienced and passed through major traumas. It must be noted, however, that these two nations are still struggling for recognition within the context of a conflict that continues to take place. This could explain why both frame their nationalistic tendencies in fixed forms of "us against them" ideologies, which are related to self-preservation (Ostroff 2009).

Irrespective of variations such as these, in terms of relationships with the rest of the world the MENA region is regarded as one bloc – yet countries within it maintain their own methods of pursuing their objectives in terms of development and the charting of their national identities. It could therefore be posited that in terms of a MENA regional order a fundamental battle is "the clash of pan[-Arabism] versus individual state identities" (national identities) (Göl 2015: 390). For instance, Turkey, Iran and Arab states have been formed along the lines of "sovereignty, nationality and territoriality that have survived" over the decades, whilst pan-Islamism has been "tested and failed [historically] to unite the Muslim people" (Göl 2015: 390). In a nutshell, the 20th century has witnessed "two transnational ideas – pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism" – stretching their reach over the MENA region but failing to stop the territorial states or individual national identities of states within the region (Murden 2009: 137, Göl 2015: 390).

3. CHALLENGING STATE IDENTITIES AT THE SUPRANATIONAL LEVEL

Since independence, states in the MENA region have been the most dominant players in a number of different fields. States have played a central role in politics, development and cultural production of different forms. Supranational challenges to the state as different as globalization and Pan Islamism have arisen in the region just as in the rest of the world. The question to which this section attempts to provide an answer is: to what extent do these potential challenges question

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the existing order and ultimately rearticulate the regional order in MENA. The focus here is on three different categories of challenge: ideological, pan-Islamic and pan-Arabic.

In this sense, ideologies are broadly defined here to include beliefs that inform the outlook of actors in the world and eventually affect social behaviour. Ideologies, whether simple or complex, serve either as a force of change or as a basis for clinging to the status quo. In this section, answers to the following two questions are provided. Do ideologies in MENA represent alternative articulations to state-based identity? Do they represent real challenges to the state and ultimately to the regional order in MENA?

Until the late 1980s, a specific understanding or interpretation of socialism in MENA, known sometimes as Arab Socialism, existed and was referred to either as Baathism and/or Nasserism. It represented a substantial challenge to the autocratic/monarchical state that was dominant in the region. For a short time, primarily during part of the 1950s and the 1960s, Arab Socialism constituted a potential threat to the post-independence national states that had been constituted or were the aim of the independence movements. This was because, ultimately, Arab Socialism aspired to a union that went beyond the boundaries established by national states and was hence a challenge to national sovereignty. Several attempts to create unions between existing states, such as the United Arab Republic in 1958–61, took place. Although they all ultimately failed, they represented a serious ideological challenge to the national states that had resulted from decolonization (Dawisha 2003). It was in this historical context that Arab Nationalism and pan-Arabism became part of the embodiments of the Nasserist project. Being an "Arab" progressively became a regional form of *asabiya* and was translated into a collective, "we feeling", identity in the region that went beyond national borders. Both constructed and imagined, this elaborated sense of "Arabness" is what began to define the mechanisms of solidarity, based not on the principle of citizenship and rights but on a constructed, primordial, notion of ethnicity and origins. However, the lack of success of those attempted unions, the successive defeats of Israel (in the 1967 war in particular) and growing conflict and dissent among Arab states all led to a de-valorisation of the pan-Arab ideal and project and its decreasing relevance. This development did not mean that the discourse of pan-Arabism as identity marker had totally faded in the region. However, it signalled that it – pan-Arabism – had effectively lost its political stamina and ideologically was no longer a viable alternative to national states in the region.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, a new ideological challenge to the post-independence national states was being articulated in MENA (Burgat and Dowell 1997). This new challenge was based on a religious discourse and established Islam as an alternative overarching identity to national state-based identities. Its appeal was based on a mix of reformism, historical revivalism and legitimation, and on a newly constructed identity. It took as its reference a whole set of political concepts, ideas and religious texts drawn from the lexicon of Islamic resources, and was associated with both historical and contemporary Muslim scholars.

One of the conceptual endeavours of this new challenge was the reinvention of the concept of *Umma* (Mandaville 2001). This was constituted as part of the effort to elaborate a new sense of identity, one that was not ethnically based but religiously founded. The objective was to call upon some historical political "glories" that Islamist scholars and political actors feared were gone.

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Some of these identities were driven and led by states, such as Saudi Arabia's Wahabism and Iran's Shiism. Others were driven by non-state actors such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Sufi Orders. A third category was made up of Islamists, Salafists and Salafi-Jihadists, some of whom did not hesitate to call for revolutionary change and even resort to violence in order to reach their objectives. All these ideologies aimed, in one way or another, at proposing alternative discourses to represent identity and suggesting new articulations of legitimacy based on a religious belief. However, some of these groups have gradually opened up to other secular ideologies and political and intellectual discourses.

Not all the Islamist ideologies were radical or violent in their discourse and in their strategies of struggle against the state, although some were. Their targets could vary from the "close other" (the Muslim who is deemed to have given up on his/her faith and is accused of apostasy) to the "distant other" (who might be a Christian, a Jew or an atheist) (Kepel 2004). Examples of violence against the "close other" were the attacks in Muslim majority countries against other Muslims as well as against established regimes. Examples of such groups are the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (Groupe islamique combattant marocain, GICM), the Algerian Armed Islamic Group (Groupe Islamique Armé, GIA) and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), constituted of so-called Arab Afghans. All these groups were strongly influenced by Salafist Jihadist ideology acquired in Afghanistan in the 1980s during the fight against Soviet occupation (also known as the Peshawar paradigm) (Rougier 2008). These groups attempted to overthrow existing Arab regimes by launching, especially in the Libyan and Algerian cases, extremely violent insurgencies. The focus of the strategy of all these organizations was the "close other" or what Mohamed Salam Ferraj – leader of the Egyptian Al Gamaa Al Islamiya, who was executed in 1981 for his participation in the assassination of Egyptian President Sadat – used to refer to as "the near enemy" (Brooke 2011). Violence against the "distant other", or "the far enemy" according to the terminology of Ferraj, also used by Al Qaeda's Osama Bin Laden and Ayman Al Zawahiri, may be seen in all the violence directed at the West in general, and some Western states in particular, as in the case of the 9/11 attacks, the attacks in Madrid in 2004, or those in London in 2005. Some of these groups target Christians from the Middle East, this being the case in Iraq and Egypt. Finally, some of these groups antagonize each other more than they do non-Muslims, as is the case with the violence between Sunnis and Shia, which has been taking place over the years in Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Pakistan. Borrowing from the concept of "*al-wala' wa al-bara*" (loyalty and disavowal), some of these groups vow total loyalty toward fellow Muslims, while they reject non-Muslims as well as those who only pretend to be Muslims without truly following their religion (Bunzel 2015). These groups are heavily influenced by the ideas of Ibn Taymiya, who argued that it was legal to kill Mongols even though they had converted to Islam because he considered them false Muslims (Ben Achour 2008). Another influential thinker for these groups is Ibn Abdel Wahab, who attacked Shia because he considered them supporters of *shirk* (idols). Some more contemporary influences can be found in the speeches of the Saudi cleric Abou Ahmed Al Hazimi, who affirms "that ignorance is not an excuse" in the sense that anyone who ever commits a sin is a sinner (Hassan 2016: 12). With such ideologies framing their actions, these radical groups have launched attacks against all communities that do not belong to the representation they create of Islam, killing Shia, Yazidis and Christian Copts.

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It would be wrong to consider that all Islamist activists are violent. On the contrary, there are many political – and non-violent – Islamist groups who adhere to the concept of *Umma* but do not share resorting to violence as a principle of action. These groups are more concerned with domestic political, economic and social issues than with transnational agendas. The most ideologically influential among these groups is the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (MB), which still exists as a movement and has inspired different political parties throughout the region, such as Turkey's Justice and Development Party, known under its Turkish initials AKP, Jordan's Islamic Action Front, Tunisia's Ennahda, Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front and Morocco's Party of Justice and Development (Martín Muñoz 1999, Roy 1994, Willis 2014). The degree of influence of the Egyptian MB varies substantially, as does the extent to which its ideology inspires their political action. Despite the recent authoritarian evolution of Turkey's AKP, what these parties share is their political and non-violent activism, and their attempt to gain power through politics rather than through violence.

Umma has taken different shapes and forms over the last couple of decades. Some resorted to it and to Islam to justify joining the struggle against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. In that situation, fighting the Soviets became a Jihad, and the fighters were referred to as Mujahidin. Others used it to justify the struggle against Israel, as in the case of Hamas, the Islamic Jihad or Hezbollah. It should be noted here that although Hamas is Sunni and Hezbollah is Shia, they support each other in their respective struggles against Israel. In the Balkan wars in the 1990s, some used *Umma* to justify the struggle against Serbs and Croats. Finally, supranational organizations such as the Organization of Islamic States, as well as different religious orders, such as Sufi Orders, create a community of faith and a shared view of the world that represent a non-violent but clearly alternative articulation of order. As a matter of fact, and as stressed by Olivier Roy in his book *Globalized Islam* (2004) for instance, Muslims from around the world have progressively distanced themselves from politics and materialism and have focused on spirituality, in order to construct a community that is supposed to have deeply internalized Muslim values and enjoys a significantly growing support among Muslims. In the end, all these groups, violent or not, aim at establishing a new *Umma* which goes beyond the borders of the national states, which they consider artificial to say the least.

In sum, and since the 1990s, there are three different brands of Islam-based challenges to the national states that were established after decolonization. Two varieties aim at top-down action while the third aims at bottom-up dynamics. Of the two that aim at top-down action, one is essentially political whereas the second follows a violent path. They can coalesce or collide, depending on the course of action and on the particular circumstances of each situation. The existence of a common enemy or threat favours cooperation, as in the case of Hamas and Hezbollah, or in the case of the relative calm under the short Muslim Brotherhood rule in Egypt. Power vacuums favour clashes and violence among these groups. But in any case, their objective is to control the national states, Islamize them and then build up wider units in pursuit of a Muslim *Umma*. Just like the Communists in the 1920s and 1930s, Islam in one state is not an option, which means that the Manifest Destiny of Islam rule is expansion. In the case of the groups that follow a political path towards Islamization, this expansion is less prominent and evident, but the links of solidarity are clear. The significant support of Turkey for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is a good example of this dynamic. The third group, which aims at a bottom-up Islamization, also ultimately aims at the

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Umma. However, since its main dynamic is spiritual, it follows a slower pace, and the construction of the Umma plays a less prominent role in its evolution.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper is to explore the challenges faced by the state in shaping identities in the MENA region, to define them and to evaluate their embeddedness. As opposed to commonly shared understandings of the region, the paper emphasizes two key aspects of nationalism and its challenges. The first aspect concerns the necessity of questioning the categories and concepts through which identities are understood in MENA, which insist on clashes and conflicts. The paper argues that there are several, deeply rooted overlapping identities in the region, which do not necessarily clash with each other. Rather, they co-exist, overlap and contribute to the definition of more complex identities in the region. In sum, adopting overarching concepts such as tribalism to explain and understand MENA is incomplete, to say the least, and potentially misleading.

The second aspect that is emphasized is that nationalism and national identities are not a recent phenomenon in the region. In several cases analysed here, it may be seen that nationalism is deeply rooted in history and has been transformed and adapted – as discussed in the background paper to this paper – by local players in order to allow for its effective political use. In other words, this paper argues that nationalism is not a recent adaptation of an essentially Euro-centred norm, but a local development that has been used and resorted to at different historical moments.

Finally, this paper shows that there are similarities as well as differences between the three major sub-regions of MENA in relation to the impact of identities at the three levels of analysis (subnational, national and supranational). The attempt to establish all-encompassing regional identities that have been articulated successively around pan-Arabism and then pan-Islamism have at best managed to co-exist with national and subnational identifications, but have mostly failed. Some of these attempts may have been successful in influencing regional order at specific historical junctures and in specific sub-regions, as in the case of pan-Arabism during the 1960s and 1970s in the Middle East, or in the case of pan-Islamism since the late 1990s; but they have not succeeded in shaping the whole regional order per se. The fact that, on the one hand, some of these agendas and identities were pushed by non-state actors, while on the other hand, local identities are deeply rooted, both in terms of nationalism (in Turkey, Iran, Egypt, and even Tunisia and Morocco, to cite just a few) and local identities (as in the case of Kurds and Amazighs/Berbers, for instance), have hindered the acceptance and imposition of pan-regional and comprehensive identities. In a sense, and despite the ideal of an *Umma*, referring to the region in general homogenizing terms is rejected across the MENA. In the end, the local "we-feeling" referred to in the background paper as *Asabiya* has endured, resulting in several alternative and overlapping identities as well as a fractured and diversely shaped regional order.

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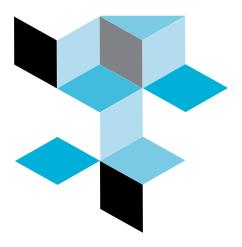
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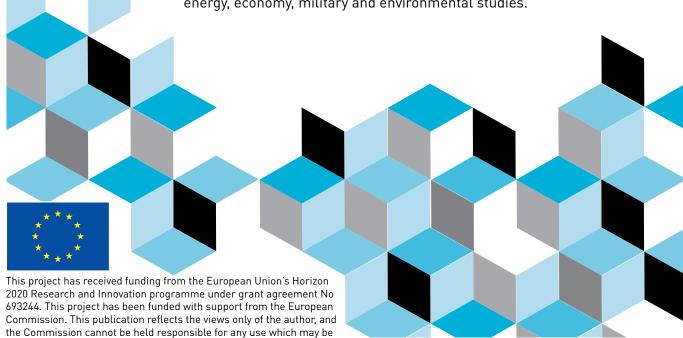
Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture: Mapping geopolitical shifts, regional order and domestic transformations (MENARA) is a research project that aims to shed light on domestic dynamics and bottom-up perspectives in the Middle East and North Africa amid increasingly volatile and uncertain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