

Symposium on Middle East and North African (MENA) conflict. Part 1: An introduction

Dina Mansour-Ille and Hamid E Ali

Dina Mansour-Ille is senior research editor at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) and may best be reached at DinaM@rusi.org. Hamid E Ali is dean of the School of Public Administration and Development Economics at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies School of Public Administration and Development Economics and may best be reached at Hamid.ali@Dohainstitute.edu.qa.

Since their independence, countries across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have witnessed subsequent waves of social and political conflicts. Armed and non-armed conflicts have almost become a defining feature of a region that has been struggling to find its own identity and a system that best represents its diverse communities and guarantees stability. Calibrated post-war power-sharing formulas of governance have produced authoritarianism, clientelism, elitism and a political post-war economy, where corruption, nepotism, injustice, and crony capitalism are rampant.¹

The MENA region is one of the most conflict-prone regions in the world – one that is characterized by deep pockets of fragility.² Fragility in the region is both multidimensional and multifaceted. Yet the region has not been given the attention it deserves in terms of understanding the fault lines of fragility and conflict. Instead, the majority of the literature tends to focus on violent conflict, particularly in the post-Arab Uprisings, with little engagement on debates focusing on “failing”, “failed”, or “collapsed” states in a context of regionally entwined conflicts.³ While inequality, marginalization and exclusion have either directly or indirectly been the sources of fragility and conflict in the region, they have also been consequences of other sources of conflict and fragility, such as the rise of Arab nationalism, sectarianism, and the rise of political Islam as well as the politics of authoritarianism and elitism in the region.

Today, the region stands at a crossroads and at a crucial tipping point. There is, therefore, an urgent need to understand and tackle the causes of fragility in the region and for paving the way for wider political dialogue towards reconciliation and peacebuilding. This special issue features country case-studies that explore some of the key features, challenges to fragility, and conflict in the MENA region. From Tunisia and Libya to Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen, this special issue provides an in-depth examination of the political economy challenges of fragility, conflict, and the dynamics of war and post-war economies in the region.

The special issue is split into two parts, with the first part published here and the second in the next publication of this journal. This first part will feature the cases of Lebanon, Sudan, Qatar, and Yemen. Except for Qatar, all the featured case-studies in this issue are war or post-war economies. As a post-war economy, Lebanon has been going through a deep economic and financial crisis since the end of 2019 that has driven the country to a political meltdown (exacerbated by the Beirut explosion in August 2020). The article “*Warlord politics and economic clientelism in Lebanon*” examines the interplay of the political, economics, and social factors that led to the current economic and political crisis. It further demonstrates how warlord politics and a corporate consociational system have misguided

¹ 'Calibrated' in this context refers to power-sharing formulas that are formulated and structured in a way to serve and consolidate the power of the elite across different groups of influence,

² E.g., Sørli et al. (2005); Potts et al. (2016); Kadri, e 2016; Turan 2017.

³ Leenders 2010).

incentives and policies and consolidated a rentier economy that inevitably led to the current situation.

The article “*Restructuring state power in Sudan*”, on the other hand, studies Sudan’s protracted conflict(s), progression made during the current peace agreement, and how competitions between military and security elites have plagued Sudan’s economy. The article examines the cost and impact of outstanding conflicts have upon sustaining peace in Sudan; it further demonstrates how senior military officers still pose a threat to Sudanese civilian rule, and the democratization process, in a context of fragility within Sudan.

“*Humanitarian aid and war economies: The case of Yemen*” examines this case of a country forced to cope with one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world today. Yet, despite Yemen’s desperate need of humanitarian aid, relatively few studies have analyzed the impact of aid on Yemen today. This article, therefore, is both timely and novel in its contribution, due to its empirical analysis of humanitarian aid. It demonstrates that the ability of local NGOs to use and deliver supplies to those suffering is severely constrained and instead has allowed war economies to thrive. This is due to the multiplicity of looting by conflicting factions, corruption, and the absence of an international deterrent that obliges the conflicting parties to preserve human rights during this war. The article offers food for thought for international donors, encouraging them to seek alternative solutions for the effective delivery and distribution of humanitarian aid in fragile states.

The article “*Did the Qatar blockade work? Evidence from trade and consumer welfare three years after the blockade*” examines the effects of the embargo (blockade) imposed on Qatar in June 2017 by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Bahrain. Using highly disaggregated product-destination-quarter trade datasets provided by the Qatar General Authority of Customs, the article argues that Qatar’s aggregate imports and consumer welfare have witnessed a significant decline in the short-run, but not in the long. Political relations with non-besieging countries seem to be associated with Qatar’s bilateral trade after the blockade, particularly in the first quarter following its imposition. Nevertheless, the blockade has tested Qatar’s ability to cope with fragility and shows to what extent it succeeded in mitigating its impacts by diversifying its import destinations and adopting new reforms to stabilize the economy and enhance the country’s food security and self-sufficiency in the medium and long-term.

With this year being the 10th anniversary of the “Arab Spring”, the second volume of this special issue will take a deep dive into countries that have been challenged by the 2011 Arab Uprisings. While Libya and Syria have been gripped by armed conflict that completely transformed the political, economic, and social dynamics in both countries, both Tunisia and Egypt have had to deal with key questions and challenges regarding the existing social contract, democracy, religion and identity, terrorism and extremism coupled with the ensuing political economy of fragility in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings.

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