

The OSCE's Mediterranean Rimland: Ten Years of Arab Uprisings

by Wolfgang Mühlberger



ABSTRACT

As the various domestic implications of the “Arab Spring” upheavals continue to reverberate and morph across MENA countries, a set of regional and global actors equally continue to shape the fate of the region. Against this compounded new paradigm of instability and multi-faceted interference, the OSCE's efforts to foster regional security cooperation face a host of emergent challenges. In order to frame the predicament of the OSCE's Mediterranean efforts, this chapter addresses the consequences and unfulfilled aspirations of the Arab uprisings, the emergence of assertive regional players seeking to shape the region as well as the evolving roles of global powers with a stake in the MENA region. Based on interviews with selected OSCE Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation and the group's current chairperson-in office, the contribution seeks to understand if the challenge is mostly of a technical-procedural nature or if the lack of a shared Mediterranean vision of cooperative security undermines the emergence of a dynamic partnership.

*OSCE | Mediterranean | North Africa | Middle East | US foreign policy |
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keywords

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Introduction

With the outbreak of the Arab uprisings in late 2010, socio-political grievances that had been managed and suppressed for decades erupted to the surface. Shaky social contracts were openly challenged by large popular movements, which initially compelled the political regimes to resort to repressive measures to ensure their continued existence.

Three main trajectories have prevailed in this transformational process. First, a revolutionary and democratising variant was witnessed in Tunisia, but was marked by strong neo-Islamist tendencies¹ and more recently the reinstatement of transitional presidential control; below the threshold of full democratisation, the Kingdom of Morocco saw wide-ranging reforms leading to an empowered Parliament. A second, restorative trend characterised by a return to or continuation of authoritarian governance could be observed in Egypt. A third dynamic has been marked by the outbreak of armed conflict with substantial foreign participation as in Libya or Syria.

Aside from these contexts, widespread uncertainty prevails in Algeria, where the Covid-19 pandemic has taken the wind out of the sails of the opposition movement but political and socio-economic indicators continue to worry ruling elites. Meanwhile, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has entered a new stage, as the recent

¹ Wolfgang Mühlberger, "How Tunisia's En-Nahda Crafts Islamist Politics: From Programmatic Failure to Neo-Islamist Framing", in *FIIA Working Papers*, No. 121 (November 2020), <https://www.fiaa.fi/en/publication/how-tunisia-en-nahda-crafts-islamist-politics>.

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unrest across the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), including East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip in May 2021, has increasingly moved into Israel proper, involving Palestinian citizens of Israel who have protested in solidarity with their fellow sufferers.

These developments at the country level, combined with broader geopolitical shifts across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), have affected several of the OSCE's Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation (MPC).² As a result of the increased fragmentation in the post-Arab-uprisings MENA, the OSCE's efforts to promote cooperative security in the area are put to the test.³ Traditionally lacking in overarching collective security structures, the region has witnessed the gradual emergence of new power brokers based on a given external actor's direct or indirect influence in trouble spots, leading to the formation of new spheres of influence. From a regional perspective, the decisive actors in this unfolding process are Turkey, a NATO member, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), both of which exert significant, competing influence in southern Mediterranean conflict theatres (the former in both Libya and Syria, the latter in Libya). In addition, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, the alienation that had gradually developed between Russia and the West since the 1990s has finally hardened within the OSCE and other multilateral fora.

Moreover, and in particular since 2015, Russia has developed a strong regional position in the South-Eastern Mediterranean (SEM) through the use of both conventional and hybrid means of warfare. Such positioning has allowed Russia to acquire significant influence in Syria, as well as in Libya, where among other things Moscow has been instrumental in blocking Tripoli's application to join the OSCE's Mediterranean Partnership for Co-operation.⁴ Furthermore, the substantial reluctance under both the Obama and Trump US administrations to engage in regional conflicts enabled Russian combat operations – especially in Syria and via mercenaries in Libya, and with the additional advantage of minimal risk of direct confrontation between the two militaries.⁵ Indeed, from the multilateral perspective, many channels of multilateral engagement have been halted, leading to a markedly deteriorating situation, epitomised by the Ukraine conflict and the related breach of territorial sovereignty, a key pillar of the OSCE's concept of

² The OSCE Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation include Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan and Israel. The empirical section of this study will focus on Tunisia and Israel.

³ International Crisis Group, "The Middle East between Collective Security and Collective Breakdown", in *Crisis Group Middle East Reports*, No. 212 (27 April 2020), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/13832>.

⁴ Walter Morana, "The OSCE and the Libyan Crisis", in *Security and Human Rights*, Vol. 30, No. 1-4 (2021), p. 23-38, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18750230-03001005>.

⁵ For a concise outline of Russia's foreign policy in the MENA region see: Wolfgang Mühlberger and Marco Siddi, "In from the Cold: Russia's Agenda in the Middle East and Implications for the EU", in *EuroMeSCo Policy Briefs*, No. 91 (4 February 2019), <https://www.euromesco.net/publication/in-from-the-cold-russias-agenda-in-the-middle-east-and-implications-for-the-eu>.

cooperative security.⁶

Against this backdrop of a deteriorating security landscape and a worsening regional and international context characterised by state fragmentation in the MENA and an exacerbation of East–West tensions, the cautiously embraced Mediterranean role of the OSCE and the expectations of individual OSCE Mediterranean partners concerning the benefits of such cooperation deserve further scrutiny. On the one hand, the question arises as to what concrete avenues of cooperation are available for the Mediterranean partners and the OSCE structure in this fraught setting. On the other, it is worth considering to what extent the OSCE's envisaged Mediterranean dimension is still functional and actionable in view of these multiple challenges. Above all, the question arises whether the proposed cooperation instruments are still effective in this context and if a recalibration or reform to improve the OSCE's role, impact and visibility in fostering cooperative Mediterranean security frameworks is achievable.

1. Ten years of Arab uprisings: Local, regional and global implications

This first section evaluates the socio-political and conflict-related effects of the Arab uprisings, from the perspectives of OSCE participating States (pS) as well as the six Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation (MPCs). It proposes a reading of these rebellions as the culmination of a process that evolved from a crisis of political legitimacy, to state failure and direct regime contestation.⁷

1.1 *The Arab uprisings: Causes, unfolding and effects*

The uprisings across the region that were sparked in late 2010 by mass demonstrations in Tunisia, were triggered by a mixture of contested social contracts and state failure. The extent of this failure of the Arab post-independence states has been epitomised by their lack of capacity to sustain and fulfil the implicit social contract.⁸ The underlying drivers for these revolts include a mixture of demographic growth, slowing economic development, saturated labour markets – not offset by

⁶ Disagreements on how to relate to Russian foreign policy under Putin have also marked the July 2021 meeting of the European Council, where the Franco-German preference for dialogue and channels of communication with Russia was overruled by a number of vocal opponents, including the Baltic states. See: Sabine Siebold, Robin Emmott and Gabriela Baczyńska, "France and Germany Drop Russia Summit Plan after EU's East Objects", in *Reuters*, 25 June 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/france-germany-drop-plans-russia-summit-after-eu-outcry-2021-06-25>.

⁷ Wolfgang Mühlberger, "The State of Arab Statehood. Reflections on Failure, Resilience and Collapse", in *IEMed/EuroMeSCO Papers*, No. 26 (September 2015), <https://www.euromesco.net/publication/the-state-of-arab-statehood-reflections-on-failure-resilience-and-collapse-by-wolfgang-muhlberger>.

⁸ Markus Loewe, Bernhard Trautner and Tina Zintl, "The Social Contract: An Analytical Tool for Countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Beyond", in *DIE Briefing Papers*, No. 17/2019 (September 2019), <https://doi.org/10.23661/bp17.2019>.

migration and remittances – as well as the influence of globalisation. All of these factors have contributed to shaping expectations and sharpening the opposition against repressive neo-patriarchism and economic neo-patrimonialism among large segments of the population.

Another element of the unrest across the region has been a religiously founded criticism geared against the ideology of Arab nationalism and, more specifically, secularism, including post-colonial state formation, mostly articulated by Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Thanks to their grass-roots organisational mode, such fundamentalist movements continue to be able to mobilise wide population segments, though not without triggering a strong reaction from governments and, more generally, antagonising opponents of politicised Islam. Particularly the armed forces, following an anti-Islamist ethos, as well as a number of monarchies on the Arabian Peninsula, are deeply opposed to the Muslim Brotherhood as a political player, as these Arab monarchies (with the exception of Qatar) view the organisation as a threat to their security and mode of governance.

1.2 Political trajectories and conflict theatres

The course of the unrest was determined not only by the opposition's ability to mobilise and its level of organisation, but also to a considerable extent by the willingness of regimes to repress dissent in order to secure their rule.⁹ In the case of Tunisia, a broad, organised civil society opposition was able to set in motion a political transformation that is still characterised by pluralism and tendencies towards democratisation. Yet, this transition's trajectory remains the exception in the region. Moreover, it is characterised by deep ideological rifts and progress is hampered by a difficult economic situation, which Tunisian President Kais Saied has cited to justify the measures he recently took to expand his powers. In Algeria, after some initial unrest in 2011, the situation quickly calmed down. Only recently, in early 2019, has widespread popular dissatisfaction about sclerotic institutions and governance practices given rise to new mass demonstrations. This public expression of discontent, known as Hirak (Movement), has come to a standstill due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic but has the potential to re-emerge sooner or later.

In the case of Morocco, a country sporting both a strong transatlantic relationship with the US and advanced economic integration with the European Union's market, King Mohamed VI has partially heeded the demands of the protest movements witnessed in the country in 2011 and beyond, implementing a number of political and economic reforms. While these have gone some way towards meeting certain demands, empowering Parliament and the elected government, strategic policy decisions ultimately rest with the Sherifian King. In Egypt, a country of

⁹ International Crisis Group, *Tackling the MENA Region's Intersecting Conflicts*, 22 December 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/5985>.

geostrategic importance at the intersection of North Africa and the Middle East and bound by a peace agreement with Israel, an alternation of power occurred in the wake of the Arab uprisings. The initial election of a new president from the Muslim Brotherhood, Mohammed Morsi, in 2012, quickly gave rise to widespread dissatisfaction due to its hegemonic governance style, and eventually led to his demise and the election of General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi as Egypt's new president, reasserting the eminent role of the armed forces in politics.

Although Israel was not directly affected by the "Arab Spring" uprisings, the implications of these changes did have important effects on its policies and regional priorities. Israel did intervene indirectly in the Syrian conflict through targeted strikes, mostly to pre-empt arms deliveries to the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, also operating inside Syria in coordination with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps.¹⁰ Yet, as the most recent escalation of violence in Israel and the oPt attests, the unresolved question of Palestinian statehood and the ongoing Israeli siege of the Gaza Strip governed by the radical Islamist group Hamas since 2007, holds considerable potential for new outbreaks of violence and instability. The fact that recent events directly involved Palestinian citizens of Israel and not only those Palestinians living in occupied territory is a stark reminder of the risks that lie ahead in the absence of diplomatic talks or concerted international efforts to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, the Arab uprisings brought about a number of reforms such as the establishment of a constitutional court and an independent electoral commission, both introduced in 2011–12. Also, the regional deflagration in neighbouring countries, most notably the civil war in Syria and the territorial expansion of the Islamic State organisation (IS or Daesh), moved the fight against terrorism to the fore, leading to measures such as a Cyber Crime Law in 2019. Jordan therefore placed renewed restrictions upon freedom of expression which had previously been expanded.¹¹ At the beginning of 2021, King Abdallah initiated a new discussion regarding a more inclusive political process to be achieved through a reform of the party and election laws.

Finally, with regard to the OSCE's Mediterranean Partnership for Co-operation, there is also the question of "missing links", as several Arab states are not participating in the OSCE's Mediterranean partnership. These include a number of riparian states of the Mediterranean, such as Libya, Palestine, Lebanon and Syria. While it is understandable that countries still partially at war (Syria) or under the leadership of non-elected governments (Libya) would make for challenging diplomatic partners, the cases of Lebanon and Palestine present some peculiarities and

¹⁰ Wolfgang Mühlberger, "Hezbollah's Military Engagement in Syria: from Hubris to Nemesis?", in Ajai Sahni (ed.), *The Fragility of Order. Essays in Honour of K.P.S. Gill*, New Delhi, Kautilya Books, 2019, p. 267-280.

¹¹ Sevan Araz, "Jordan Adopts Sweeping Cybersecurity Legislation", in *MEI Articles*, 30 January 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/node/80816>.

seem less straightforward. In the cases of Lebanon (and Syria), the lack of a peace agreement with Israel might represent an impediment to partnership, whereas in the case of Palestine, the fragmented political authority between the West Bank and Gaza, as well as the Palestinian National Authority's fraught relationship with Israel, represent major obstacles to establishing a functional participation within the framework of the OSCE's Mediterranean Partnership.

1.3 Perennial unrest: A morphing shatterbelt

In addition to these political developments across SEM states during the past ten years of continuous Arab uprisings, a series of negative externalities with pronounced security implications emanated from the OSCE's southern Mediterranean rimland. Until the 2017 fall of Mosul in Iraq and the subsequent collapse of the territory held by Daesh across both Iraq and Syria, a massive wave of jihadist terror attacks struck Europe. Meanwhile, uncontrolled mass migration flows mostly from Syria via Turkey culminated in what came to be known as the 2015 European migration "crisis". However, push and pull factors for migration are not limited to low or high intensity conflict theatres. Polls indicate that up to 50 per cent of youth in Tunisia are eager to emigrate despite the new pluralist political system in the making, which they consider as not delivering sufficient economic opportunities.¹² As counter-terrorism and migration or border management have a central place on the OSCE's agenda, the Organisation should seek to leverage its reputation and expertise to promote new initiatives to cope with these problems in the Mediterranean region.

As demonstrated by the resurgence of new mass demonstrations across the region in late 2019 – affecting in particular Lebanon, Algeria, Iraq and Sudan – varying degrees of state failure across the MENA remain a continuing challenge. Furthermore, this is associated with the risk of regional and international spill-overs adversely affecting hitherto spared countries or triggering the possibility of escalation into warlike scenarios. These domestic factors of instability are now being reinforced by new intra-regional rivalries (primarily pitting Turkey against the UAE).

This complex situation shows, on the one hand, the challenges that MPCs are facing in fragile regional and domestic environments and, on the other, the need to resolve ongoing tensions and armed conflicts at the negotiating table in the interest of establishing regional security arrangements.¹³ However, the OSCE, which has not been able to emerge "as a leading international or regional entity when it comes to addressing comprehensive security in the post-Cold War era",¹⁴ also finds itself in a certain competitive relationship with other regional,

¹² Afrobarometer, *More Than Half of Tunisia's Youth and Highly Educated Have Considered Emigrating, Study Shows*, 13 November 2018, <https://afrobarometer.org/node/4340>.

¹³ International Crisis Group, *Tackling the MENA Region's Intersecting Conflicts*, cit., p. 45.

¹⁴ Monika Wohlfeld and Fred Tanner, "Comprehensive Security and New Challenges: Strengthening

multilateral or intergovernmental organisations. The EU, in particular, has also created structures for peaceful conflict resolution and crisis management within the framework of the Common Security and Defence Policy and the European Neighbourhood Policy, and through the creation of the European External Action Service, a dedicated *corps diplomatique* for the European Union. Therefore, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the OSCE's contemporary operating environment, the next section will analyse the situation of multilateralism more broadly, before connecting the dots between sections one and two based on the inputs from certain Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation.

2. Multilateralism and its discontents: Evolving geopolitics

The United Nations continues to be the central organisation with a global reach and mandate when it comes to peacebuilding in a multilateral context. Yet, as has been pointed out in a recent publication, the OSCE has been able to acquire a reputation of neutrality and technical capabilities.¹⁵ This pertains to its development of a conflict and crisis management toolkit which provides the Organisation with important capabilities that can support similar objectives pursued by the UN and other multilateral bodies.¹⁶

Indeed, while the OSCE's legacy as a Cold War de-escalation and confidence building tool *par excellence* has been slowly fading over the past three decades, its operational capacity has been diversified over the years and it now covers a wide range of security-related topics such as border-management, counter-terrorism, ceasefire monitoring and election observation. Yet, the Organisation and its 57 participating States are bound by consensual decision-making. In practice, such unanimity has grown considerably harder to achieve against the backdrop of an emerging multipolar setting and resurgent geopolitical tensions among key powers. Assessing the impact of the evolving geopolitical setting on the OSCE's actions and operations in conflict resolution, management and prevention is therefore essential.

With regard to the Mediterranean and the broader MENA region, these circumstances include the return of Russia as an active geopolitical player,¹⁷ the rise of regional powers as conflict parties, in particular Turkey and the UAE, as well as the implications of the former Trump administration's attitude toward the fraying international liberal order and the associated crisis of multilateralism.

the OSCE", in *IAI Papers*, No. 21|23 (February 2021), p. 16, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/13457>.

¹⁵ International Crisis Group, *Tackling the MENA Region's Intersecting Conflicts*, cit., p. 39.

¹⁶ The difficulty of operating outside the OSCE's regional mandate, defined by the sovereign territories of participating States, represents a central constraint to enlarging the geographical scope of the Organisation, including with regard to the scope and quality of activities related to MPCs.

¹⁷ Leonid Issaev and Alisa R. Shiskina, "Russia in the Middle East: In Search of Its Place", in Wolfgang Mühlberger and Toni Alaranta (eds), *Political Narratives in the Middle East and North Africa. Conceptions of Order and Perceptions of Instability*, Cham, Springer, 2020, p. 95-114.

Due to its set-up, the OSCE is not only confronted with the general challenges of multilateral diplomacy (such as unanimous decision-making), but has also been operating increasingly in the shadow of other regional alliances such as NATO and the European Union since the 1990s. This has been partially caused by EU expansion towards Eastern Europe, the inception of its Eastern (and later Southern) Neighbourhood Policies, as well as the incremental NATO expansion into former Soviet space in Eastern Europe. The very logic of the OSCE was thus partially undermined, weakening its underlying confidence-building and deconfliction mechanisms based on the principles of cooperative security once shared between “East” and “West”, the two major geostrategic poles, and eventually opening avenues for additional geopolitical actors, narratives and *modi operandi*.

Nevertheless, Russia's renewed assertiveness represents both a necessity and an opportunity to re-examine the OSCE's philosophy of cooperative security. The underlying East–West logic of the Organisation could be positively stimulated by an agreement on disputes in the MENA region, such as Libya. This may potentially help to repair some of the tensions that (re)emerged following the 2011 NATO/Responsibility to Protect (R2P) intervention in that country based on UN Security Council Resolution 1973 (not opposed by the Kremlin at the time), and more so following Russia's military intervention in Ukraine in 2014, further complicated by its own relatively stealthy role in Libya's theatre of operations.¹⁸ One topic for discussion could include the question of Libya's admission to the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership, ideally based on a prior conflict settlement among the decisive external players, and among competing Libyan factions.

From this angle, the question of the MCP admission of Libya, whose UN-recognised government in Tripoli had repeatedly albeit unsuccessfully applied to become an OSCE Mediterranean partner, could represent a symbolic field of activity for deconfliction. Surely, such efforts would require the willingness for compromise among the centrally involved actors and interested parties in Libya, including Russia, the US, European states, Turkey, Egypt and the UAE, among others.

2.1 The United States, Putin's Russia and the evolving global order

The first post-Soviet and post-Cold War decade in the Middle East corresponded to a unipolar moment of US domination. The relative stability ensured by the US-dominated security order in the region during the 1990s, in particular when compared to the post-2011 era, has been shaken by a number of events. The US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the perceived abandonment of Egypt's Mubarak in 2011 and the negotiation of the JCPOA with Iran led to a questioning of the rapport with the United States, considered to be disrupting a stable status quo. Accordingly, in line with scrutinising the convergence of interests with Washington, polls conducted

¹⁸ Nader Ibrahim and Ilya Barabanov, “The Lost Tablet and the Secret Documents. Clues Pointing to a Shadowy Russian Army”, in *BBC Long Reads*, 11 August 2021, <https://bbc.in/3islFKj>.

over the past years indicate a preference for a strategy of counterbalancing external hegemonic actors, even though the Russian siding with the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad in September 2015 has also tarnished Moscow's image in certain quarters.¹⁹ Nevertheless, as an emerging trend, Russia's staunch support for embattled allies (Syria) and Beijing's general lack of insistence on human rights issues have led to an intensification of relations with Middle Eastern authoritarian regimes to the detriment of Western influence in the region.

Concerning US foreign policy, it has developed in very different forms during the last decade of Arab upheavals. There have been indeed major changes in the US Middle East policy under the last presidents, as the jumps from Barack Obama to Donald Trump and to Joe Biden have shown. It now remains to be seen if and how Biden, who as the former Vice President is well versed in foreign policy matters, will differ from his two predecessors, who were entirely inexperienced in this area; how the tense relationship with Russia will develop; and which Middle Eastern trouble spots Biden will focus on. In any case, his readiness to resume negotiations with Iran on its nuclear programme is both in tune with the strategic Russian interest in a nuclear-weapon-free Iran and US support for the Non-Proliferation Treaty. More importantly though, it also corresponds to Biden's inclination for multilateral diplomacy on complex issues – a clear departure from the attitude of his direct predecessor and a logical reconnection with the posture embraced by the Obama administration.

On the other hand, president Putin has been able to cement his grip on power, navigating domestic constraints and international challenges in a way that has allowed him to score points via foreign policy actions (Crimea annexation, Syria intervention, stealth role in Libya) and to establish and reinvigorate intense diplomatic relations across the Arab world, Israel and beyond. Among others, this is underscored by the Russian sale of S-400 air defence batteries to Turkey, a NATO member, and the management of the relation with Iran over their cooperation in Syria, for instance through the "Astana process".

2.2 The new MENA conflict landscape: Collective insecurity vs. cooperative security

A major implication of the "Arab Spring" uprisings has been a partial reconfiguration of the political order as well as of the conflict landscape across the MENA region. The insurgencies spurred both global and intra-regional rivalries leading to hard power games, as the situations in Syria, Libya and Yemen indicate.²⁰ The roles of international actors have also changed. In Libya, the 2011 R2P intervention under

¹⁹ Wolfgang Mühlberger, "Arab Public Opinion: The View on Russia's Foreign Policy", in Aldo Ferrari and Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti (eds), *Forward to the Past? New/Old Theatres of Russia's International Projection*, Milano, Ledizioni, 2020, p. 87-107, <https://www.ispionline.it/it/node/25797>.

²⁰ International Crisis Group, "The Middle East between Collective Security and Collective Breakdown", cit.

UN Security Council mandate indicated that US President Obama, clearly a foreign policy novice, opted for a “leading from behind” approach, in line with the US’s marked reluctance to embark on new military interventions in the Arab world – leaving the onus of intervention to European states, situated in the strategic vicinity of the North African state. Conversely, in 2015 Russia took the military lead in Syria unilaterally, leaving the UN and multilateralism out of the game entirely. As a result, Moscow returned to secure its old foothold in a country strategically situated between Turkey, Israel and Iraq and adjacent to the Eastern Mediterranean, a wider region rich in hydrocarbon reserves.

Indeed, this emerging regional conflict landscape is marked by two central, assertive players, Russia and Turkey, who continue to carve out prominent positions in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean. However, the future role of both Russia and Turkey remains uncertain. First, not always have Russia’s and Turkey’s military interventions been direct and decisive.²¹ Second, mutual competition also persists in some areas, for instance in Libya, where they are supporting different conflict actors. In addition to the growing assertiveness of Ankara and Moscow, a whole series of other regional states, from Israel to Iran, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have caused headwinds, creating a regional context characterised by deepening geopolitical rivalries. In view of such disruptions, some scholars talk of a regional “insecurity complex”,²² which highlights the need for multilateral dialogue to ensure de-escalation, conflict management and, ideally, conflict resolution.

A range of remedies have been proposed in academic and policy circles to limit the present trends of regional fragmentation and conflict. Some have advocated a “Westphalian” approach aiming at some sort of a “*grand entente*”, corresponding to a regional defragmentation in analogy to the mid-17th-century agreements reached in Europe after the Thirty Years’ War. A second line of thought corresponds to the so-called “Helsinki approach”, based on the 1975 Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) Final Act signed in the Finnish capital, which bridged the ideological blocs during the Cold War, resulting in relative deconfliction, the so-called “*détente*”. Sub-regional security architectures have also been repeatedly discussed for the MENA region.²³

Concerning the Helsinki approach to MENA conflict dynamics, the prevailing line of thought moves from the assumption that the lack of a regional security architecture is a major factor preventing the pacification and stabilisation of

²¹ Nader Ibrahim and Ilya Barabanov, “The Lost Tablet and the Secret Documents”, cit.

²² Muriel Asseburg, Wolfram Lacher and Guido Steinberg, “Regionale Unordnung in Europas südlicher Nachbarschaft. Konfliktakteure verfolgen Interessen unbeirrt”, in Barbara Lippert, Stefan Mair and Volker Perthes (eds), “Internationale Politik unter Pandemie-Bedingungen. Tendenzen und Perspektiven für 2021”, in *SWP-Studie*, No. 26 (December 2020), p. 73-76, <https://doi.org/10.18449/2020S26>.

²³ The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) published a paper on the topic as early as 1998. See Peter Jones, *Towards a Regional Security Regime for the Middle East. Issues and Options*, Solna, SIPRI, October 2011, p. vii-viii, <https://www.sipri.org/node/1828>.

the strategic, yet relatively chaotic setting. However, applying this model and its peculiar functioning logic to a different historical situation and geographic region represents a major conceptual challenge. Fundamental questions such as the states to be involved as participants, the definition of the agenda and the determination of procedural rules are challenging and require willingness on the part of all concerned parties to enter into such a demanding process²⁴ – a prerequisite that has not been met to date.

2.3 The OSCE's standing in the international arena

With the annexation of Crimea and the military escalation in Ukraine since 2014, Russia, an influential OSCE pS, stood accused of violating the Organisation's core principles regarding the use of force, trespassing borders and violating a state's territorial integrity. Consequently, this could have led to the eventual demise of the OSCE's role as a conflict resolution tool in the European context. Paradoxically, it instead paved the way for renewed relevance of the Organisation as the launch of the Structured Dialogue and the establishment of the Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine have shown.²⁵

During this same period, the negative implications of the instability that followed the Arab Spring reached their zenith, with an upsurge of Daesh terrorist attacks in Europe and a wave of uncontrolled mass migration entering the continent. Furthermore, the growing assertiveness of Turkey and a burgeoning – yet equally antagonistic – relationship between Ankara and Moscow in the context of Syria contributed to further eroding the US and European influence in the strategic SEM vicinity. On the geostrategic level, what has been emerging as of late is a crisis landscape marked by complexity and permanence: several multi-layered and protracted conflicts, ranging from low intensity (Libya) to high intensity (Syria) emerged.

In order to assess the implications of this setting for the OSCE's Mediterranean Partnership and the Organisation's out-of-area activities, a number of interviews have been conducted with the current Polish Chair of the OSCE Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation Group (2021) and representatives of two Mediterranean Partners, Tunisia and Israel. These aim to gauge the perspectives and priorities of OSCE MPCs and the present chairperson-in office of the Mediterranean Partnership.

²⁴ Michael McFaul, "A Helsinki Process for the Middle East", in *Democracy Journal*, No. 8 (Spring 2008), p. 19-21, <https://democracyjournal.org/?p=5664>.

²⁵ Christian Nünlist, "Reviving Dialogue and Trust in the OSCE in 2018", in *CSS Background Papers*, December 2017, https://css.ethz.ch/en/publications/other-reports/details.html?id=/r/e/v/i/reviving_dialogue_and_trust_in_the_osce_.

3. The view from the South: Arab and Israeli perspectives on the OSCE and the Mediterranean Partnership for Co-operation

Building on the analysis in the first two sections, this section will critically assess the effectiveness of the OSCE's Mediterranean Partnership in terms of mandate, availability and usage of instruments, institutional competition and future outlook.

3.1 *The OSCE's Mediterranean outreach from dialogue to partnership*

In the run-up to the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in 1975, the view on the Southern Mediterranean from a "Northern" perspective was different compared to today. First, the West and the Soviet Union had carved out clear zones of influence in the Arab world and with regard to Israel, with each bloc establishing strong links to states across the region, based on development aid, military supplies and cooperation treaties. Even countries that chose to forgo a distinct alignment with either Moscow or Washington – mostly for ideological reasons, as was the case for Gaddafi's Libya – could still be considered close to one of the two blocs, despite the fact that formally all Arab countries had joined the Non-Aligned Movement. Second, multilateral bodies "competing" with the OSCE were not active in the region to the extent they are today. For instance, the EU (at that time the European Community) had not yet developed its European Neighbourhood Policy or the Common Security and Defence Policy, whereas NATO's rapport with Arab states was still lacking an institutional framework, which is nowadays provided by NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative.²⁶

Accordingly, certain elements of the cooperative framework with the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean states anticipated by the Helsinki Final Act are now covered to large extent by the EU, NATO and other specialised structures such as the 5+5 security cooperation in the Western Mediterranean. This does not mean that potential space for cooperative security initiatives à la Helsinki is completely absent. Hence, despite a historical legacy and recognised competence in terms of conflict resolution and mediation, the OSCE needs to think in terms of complementarity with other multilateral organisations when it comes to its cooperation with SEM countries.

Building on the provisions of the Helsinki Final Act, in the mid-1990s, at a moment of great expectations and high hopes fuelled by the signature of the Oslo accords between Israel and the PLO, the OSCE's cooperation with a number of South Mediterranean countries was eventually formalised with the creation of

²⁶ Each of the MPCs, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Israel and Jordan, are also cooperating in NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue framework, first launched in 1994. See: Margherita Bianchi, Guillaume Lasconjarias and Alessandro Marrone, "Projecting Stability in NATO's Southern Neighbourhood", in *NDC Conference Reports*, No. 03/2017 (July 2017), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/8030>.

the Mediterranean Partnership for Co-operation.²⁷ This was accompanied by an incremental development of cooperation instruments, ranging from secondments to OSCE structures and its headquarters in Vienna to the establishment of a partnership fund in 2007, a tool designed to finance "out-of-area" activities such as, inter alia, thematic conferences, training courses and workshops.²⁸

Probably the most visible component of the framework for dialogue and cooperation between the 57 OSCE pS and the six MPCs is the Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation Group, chaired by the incoming annual country chair of the OSCE. Although this body is considered rather informal, given its mandate and competencies, it is complemented by an annual conference and other gatherings and activities. Yet, the concrete results of these cooperation initiatives have remained fairly limited. Therefore, despite the creation of specific cooperation structures, the question of the effectiveness and utility of the OSCE's Mediterranean Partnership and its potential for reform remains a matter of debate.²⁹

Even though MPCs focus their dissatisfaction on procedural and status questions (for instance the question of observers not being full pS in the OSCE and thus lacking voting rights and a say over the Organisation's functioning), the paucity in substantive output and the limited usage of the available cooperation instruments – such as election assistance and monitoring or legal advice and training opportunities – by MPCs themselves indicates that substantive issues are also at stake. In turn, such a state of affairs calls into question the very rationale as well as the functioning logic of the OSCE's MPC scheme.

3.2 Extra-regional trust-building?

Since its inception, the OSCE has faced the conceptual problem of how to marry the hard security aka political-military dimension inside its core operational realm (i.e., the geographic extent of the "OSCE area", defined by pS) with the cooperative logic it proposes as a method to achieve stability and establish a peaceful order with reduced tensions.³⁰ However, this was an issue that could be tested and solved in practice among the signatories of the CSCE. A similar tension also seems to exist within the context of the OSCE's Mediterranean Partnership for Co-operation

²⁷ Stephanie Liechtenstein, "The OSCE-Mediterranean Partnership and the Arab Uprisings", in *IPI Meeting Notes*, December 2011, <https://www.ipinst.org/?p=1024>.

²⁸ For instance, see: Andrea Dessi, "Youth and the Mediterranean: Exploring New Approaches to Dialogue and Cooperation", in *Documenti IAI*, No. 17|03 (February 2017), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/7290>.

²⁹ In 2010 Monika Wohlfeld reached the conclusion that the Mediterranean Dialogue is devoid of any positive, shared vision. See Monika Wohlfeld, "The OSCE and the Mediterranean: Assessment of a Decade of Efforts to Reinvigorate a Dialogue", in *Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy* (ed.), *OSCE Yearbook 2010*, Baden-Baden, Nomos, 2011, p. 351-368, <https://ifsh.de/en/publications/osce-yearbook/yearbook-2010>.

³⁰ Franziska Smolnik, "Cooperation, Trust, Security? The Potential and Limits of the OSCE's Economic and Environmental Dimension", in *SWP Research Papers*, No. 16 (December 2019), p. 12, <https://doi.org/10.18449/2019RP16>.

where the operationalisation of dialogue remains limited and questions regarding the role of the OSCE's three programmatic dimensions (or "baskets") have not been adequately conceptualised.³¹ Indeed, pursuing a comprehensive and cooperative security approach in the highly conflictual environment of the Mediterranean is extremely challenging. However, the Helsinki Final Act made reference to the "Mediterranean dimension" as a crucial element for the broader security of the OSCE area. It was on this basis that institutional efforts to formalise cooperation with Southern Mediterranean partners were undertaken in the first place.

Accordingly, the internal stability of Southern Mediterranean partner countries also tends to be conceived as a security issue from the OSCE perspective. Nevertheless, such a stability conception risks being achieved at the detriment of respect of human rights, which is an OSCE backbone, as "human security" is part and parcel of the third dimension of its comprehensive security concept. An additional complicating factor is the lack of internal consensus on the nature and scope of out-of-area activities, while EU member states are eager to avoid any kind of overlap with their own – i.e. bilateral – activities.³²

On top of these challenges, a major ideological cleavage in the Arab world opposes those governments and political actors who have embraced and are supporting political Islam and those who reject a political system of Islamist inspiration. This fundamental tension at the heart of regional politics is further complicated by the fact that two major actors, Turkey and Iran, are ruled by an Islamist party or system, respectively. Even though not part of the Arab world, both have come to play central roles, particularly in several of the post-Arab uprising countries torn by internal strife, such as Libya and Syria. Most notably, this competition has manifested itself in the tensions that erupted between Turkey and Qatar on one hand and the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt on the other.

Such wider intra-regional divides are major obstacles to the development of a regional cooperative security framework inspired by the CSCE process. Indeed, some scholars and observers argue that the current levels of strife would rather justify the use of a Westphalian lens, due to the intensity of the confrontations and the levels of fragmentation, also in view of internal contestation of the prevailing political order.³³ In any case, justified by the Cold War analogy regarding intra-regional cleavages, negotiation processes, even if of uncertain outcome, could contribute to keeping channels of communication open and averting the risk of open warfare.³⁴

³¹ More fundamentally, due to the lack of a clear-cut strategy, the objective of Mediterranean cooperation remains ill-defined. For instance, it is unclear if the OSCE should foster trust-building, comprehensive security and cooperative mechanisms within the SEM, or, alternatively, if the region should be incorporated – in the long run – into the OSCE structures proper.

³² Monika Wohlfeld, "The OSCE and the Mediterranean", cit., p. 362.

³³ Michael Axworthy and Patrick Milton, "A Westphalian Peace for the Middle East", in *Foreign Affairs*, 10 October 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1118454>.

³⁴ Michael McFaul, "A Helsinki Process for the Middle East", cit.

3.3 The OSCE chairperson and Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation

The engagement of the OSCE with the Southern Mediterranean states has faced two substantial issues from its inception in the mid-1970s: on the one hand, the variety of "Mediterranean interests" of OSCE pS, on the other the varying expectations of the Southern Mediterranean states that have incrementally become official partners for cooperation.³⁵ These two framing characteristics have also been impacted during the first decade of the Arab uprisings, providing both of them with new qualities, rather than reducing their extent. From this perspective, the "view from the South" is of central importance to understand the challenges and opportunities that the OSCE's Mediterranean engagement, however limited in practical scope and strategically ill-defined, may present to the OSCE's pS as well as to the MPCs.

A challenging chairmanship

It has become customary that the incoming OSCE chairperson presides over the Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation Group. This chairing function is currently (2021) carried out by Poland. It is evident from the geostrategic position of each incoming chair that its connections to and related interests in the Mediterranean vary widely, even though some of the transnational threats emanating from the conflict theatres in the Southern Mediterranean have potential negative impacts on "European security" at large. Notwithstanding, this appraisal points to a structural problem related to the OSCE's dialogue with the Southern Mediterranean: it remains essentially driven by national perspectives rather than informed by an institutional approach. For instance, as the incoming Polish chair has stressed,³⁶ its own democratising experience following the fall of the Iron Curtain has been of interest to some Arab countries during the political transitions caused by the Arab Spring upheavals, in particular for Tunisia. The Polish chair also supports the recent proposal brought forward by Tunisia regarding the question of asset recovery.³⁷

Previously, during the Italian chairmanship of the OSCE's Mediterranean Contact Group in 2017, expectations had been high regarding the "opportunities to reinvigorate the OSCE's Mediterranean Partnership".³⁸ In practice, in view of the various constraints facing any incoming or active chairmanship in promoting

³⁵ Monika Wohlfeld, "OSCE's Mediterranean Engagement on the Eve of the 4th Anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act", in *Documenti IAI*, No. 14|15 (December 2014), p. 4, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/2823>.

³⁶ Interview conducted with a Polish diplomatic representative, Vienna, May 2021.

³⁷ OSCE, *OSCE Mediterranean Partnership Discussion: Fight against Transnational Organized Crime Depends on Multilateral Co-Operation*, 10 May 2021, <https://www.osce.org/node/486035>.

³⁸ Center for Security Studies (CSS) and Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF), *OSCE Focus 2017. Empowering the OSCE in Challenging Times. Reflections and Recommendations*, Geneva, DCAF, December 2017, p. 12, <https://www.dcaf.ch/node/13193>.

out-of-area activities, few concrete results came to fruition in the cooperation framework with the Mediterranean partners.

The view from North Africa...

From the perspective of the MPC Tunisia,³⁹ the merits of the OSCE's engagement with the Southern Mediterranean are evident, as the country's foreign policy orientation is determined by strong Mediterranean and European components, marked by a deep economic integration with the European Union's common market. Yet, the profoundly transformative impact of the Arab uprisings on the North African state's political system requires an adaptation of the OSCE's instruments in order to enhance the dialogue and create new, fine-tuned opportunities for cooperation. Possible cooperation avenues relate to Tunisia's political transition to democracy, the rule of law and full citizenship. Equally, the Tunisian project proposal of institutionalising an "asset recovery programme" to counter terrorism and corruption would correspond to a significant enhancement of the OSCE's engagement with the Southern Mediterranean.

... and Israel

Among multilateral working groups, the MPCs of the OSCE also have a special feature in that several Arab states sit together with Israel at the same table. From the Israeli perspective, participation in the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership is in principle positive, even if there are institutional barriers – such as the problem of the systematic financing of out-of-area activities – to implement potential projects. The different forms of gatherings facilitated on a regular basis by the OSCE represent a possibility to enhance professional networks, for instance on human trafficking and border management. In this context, the Italian facilitation of anti-trafficking trainings was highlighted.⁴⁰

3.4 Cooperation issues and outlook

The Mediterranean engagement of the OSCE has gained contours over several decades in a painstakingly slow process due to a number of structural predicaments (lack of strategy) and ad-hoc operational constraints (limited financial means). Its very origin, the inclusion of a section on security in the Mediterranean in the Helsinki Final Act, reflects the process of unanimity rather than a genuine consensus regarding the purpose, scope and objectives to be achieved by this element of the declaration.⁴¹ Yet, in and of itself, the principle of dialogue and

³⁹ Interview with the Head of Mission in Austria, H. E. Ambassador Mohamed Mezghani, Vienna, June 2021.

⁴⁰ Interview with representative from Israeli Embassy in Vienna, June 2021.

⁴¹ During the CSCE negotiations in the mid-1970s, Malta threatened to obstruct the final agreement if no reference to the Mediterranean would be included in what came to be known as the Helsinki Final Act. In his seminal work, Morgan refers to this episode as the "Maltese contretemps". See

efforts to nurture channels of communication represent a central pillar of any conflict resolution, crisis management or technical cooperation. Reaching out to partners for security cooperation in the geographical vicinity is therefore perfectly reasonable.

In practice, since the signing of Helsinki Final Act, several organisations have pursued objectives in line with those of the Act related to the Mediterranean. Also, the geopolitical setting has evolved substantially. First, the Cold War came to an end 30 years ago. Following the US unipolar moment during the 1990s, this setting has now been replaced by a new dynamic. On the one hand, the war in Ukraine and the Russian annexation of Crimea are clearly at odds with the spirit and the letter of the OSCE. Even though formats for deconfliction were found with the Russian Federation under the mediation of the OSCE (Minsk Agreement), the Organisation's overall role as a model of a functioning cooperative security mechanism certainly has been adversely affected. On the other hand, Russia's foreign policy line also strongly impacts the Mediterranean sphere, as its military involvement in Syria and its posture regarding Libya have shown.

Second, the instability and uncertainties caused by the Arab uprisings, which continue to shape trajectories in several Mediterranean countries such as Algeria or Lebanon, where the respective HIRAK movements express their opposition to the existing power structures, potentially amplify transnational threats as well as heighten the risk of state failure or collapse. Also, assertive regional players have reshuffled the cards of alliances. As a result, new broad lines of conflict and competition have emerged, where the cooperative logic à la OSCE would offer a valuable instrument to deal with them and help to overcome zero-sum mentalities.

Yet, applying the OSCE's cooperative logic in practice appears increasingly difficult in the Mediterranean context. The fundamental question remains whether the prospect of embracing the OSCE's spirit and accepting the three dimensions that constitute the logic of comprehensive and cooperative security is of equal strategic value and political relevance for all Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation.

Outlook and concluding thoughts

The Arab Spring uprisings triggered a new conflict landscape across the MENA region, and the OSCE itself is hampered by the unresolved conflict in Ukraine. This contemporary European – and OSCE – security crisis represents a turning point for cooperative security while the negative externalities from geopolitical competition and conflicts in the Arab world have severely impacted Europe during the past decade of unfolding regional upheaval. Against this backdrop, cooperation on security issues has become more challenging, while all the more urgent. The OSCE's operational logic of comprehensive security has little chance

Michael Cotey Morgan, *The Final Act. The Helsinki Accords and the Transformation of the Cold War*, Princeton/Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2018, p. 199-200.

to be picked up as a source of inspiration by the MPCs, if it is not supported by external players, especially those who have invested considerable political capital to carve out new roles of influence in various conflict theatres. Therefore, for the time being, it seems that technical cooperation on specific fields of shared interest (such as counter-terrorism and border management) will be at the centre of the OSCE's engagement with the Mediterranean, leaving the grand scheme of regional de-confliction for future consideration.

Conclusion

Since the early 1990s and the end of the Cold War, the OSCE has witnessed a progressive decline in relevance and even active contestation by Russia, which emphasised its "lack of relevance" or even depicted it as a "Western instrument". Nevertheless, the OSCE as a multilateral institution has continued to embody the principle of dialogue as a means for conflict resolution. In the Ukraine conflict in particular, the OSCE has been playing a crucial role in mediating and facilitating negotiations between the parties.

In Europe's geostrategic vicinity of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean, the OSCE has been incrementally formalising a dialogue format with now six partner countries, based on the historical reference to the region in the Helsinki Final Act. However, the triple logic of disarmament, cooperative security and respect for human rights, representing the foundational pillars of the OSCE, seems to be perceived somewhat differently by the various MPCs. Therefore, their tentative implementation does not take place within the framework of an institutionalised structure modelled on the OSCE, but rather on a bilateral basis, and is mostly limited to cooperation in specific fields of shared security interests between the Organisation and the partners.

Since the outbreak of the Arab uprisings, the MENA region has not only faced internal upheavals, but also witnessed the growing roles of new regional and external actors, especially in several ongoing armed conflicts. In this context, if the OSCE succeeds in living up to its potential as a dialogue forum for conflict reduction or even resolution, the stability of the region would have much to gain. Indeed, the institution could play a facilitating role in overcoming prevailing zero-sum approaches to conflict resolution and potentially lay the groundwork for stabilising initiatives of regional scope.

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