

Section Three

**Understanding the Expansion of
Insurgency and Terrorism
in the Arab Region**

With the Arab Spring, Arab citizens opened their eyes to a new reality: they finally had the opportunity to change their present – and hence their future. At the same time, various governments and counter-revolutionary forces have directed the events that unfolded since January 2011 in a way that has allowed radical ideologies to spread. While one would have expected fierce beliefs in democracy, political representativeness and social harmony to win over, the Arab world ended up - so far - being ruled by instability, intolerance, radicalism and violence. But this does not mean that everything is necessarily bleak. The black tunnel that the Arab region seemed to be stuck in also gave room for some positive prospects, such as the organization of free and fair elections in Tunisia and the fact that instability did not necessarily extend to the entire region. Nevertheless, the MENA region is facing what is for now: spirals of violence, a widening of the gap between opposing ideologies and/or beliefs as well as the return of old demons such as the “Sunni-Shiite rift”, the “Saudi-Iranian rivalry,” the negative consequences for the interference of foreign powers in the region’s affairs and the prevailing of different forms and degrees of terrorism.

The expansion of violence in the MENA region has little if anything to do with fatality. Some of the evolutions we witnessed over the past five years clearly went beyond the control of politicians and citizens. Nevertheless, the sociology of the region may help us understand some facts. For example, why did sectarianism end up growing significantly in a country like Syria, knowing that the population would have earned more benefits by putting their religious grievances aside? The Syrian regime may well take benefit of playing the sectarian card, but some of these same logics also pertain to the nature of the Syrian society.

Violence is not inherent to the MENA's DNA: the chaos that has prevailed in the region since 2011 has different explanations, some of them structural, the others cyclical. In order for us to be able to sort out the relevance of each of these elements for explaining the region's many headaches, the first part of this chapter will review the different types of challenges that generated so much trouble and uncertainties in the MENA region over the past five years. The report will then analyze the reasons and the implications of such dynamics, be they political, economic, social, or religious. Finally, the report will mention the basic conditions that would allow the MENA region to both benefit from a better start and head towards stability, security and human dignity.

A Region Full of Challenges and Uncertainties:

The Arab Spring proved that the ostensible stability of the MENA region was an illusion. Decades of authoritarian rule and repressive policies were suddenly questioned following the extension of the Tunisian uprisings (2010/2011) to the rest of the region. The loss by some regional leaders and/or regimes of their legitimacy – a direct consequence for decades of abuses – led to the Arab Spring. But the Arab Spring also ended up provoking regional insecurity and/or instability. The scenario that was initially expected – the possibility for citizens to benefit easily from democratic rule – gave room instead to the emergence of a series of threats and challenges that considerably undermined MENA prospects. These included examples of political and/or territorial fragmentation, the rise of militias, the reawakening of the Sunni-Shiite rift, the radicalisation of some groups and/or movements as well as the affirmation of sectarianism and terrorism.

Political/territorial fragmentation:

The idea of national belonging is nothing new in the MENA region. While many Arab countries achieved national independence during

the first half of the 20th century, many of the provinces that had been part of the Ottoman Empire already had historical and local characteristics that contributed to shaping contemporary national identities.¹ Today, the popular feeling of national belonging remains strong in many if not all the Arab countries. But situations of political polarization combined with the historical persistence of some local particularities also ended up provoking conflicts. From this perspective, four countries have clearly gone through profound changes and evolutions that questioned the future of their national and territorial cohesions: Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen.

Despite policies of systematic marginalization, for a decades Syria had earned an exaggerated reputation of a country that enjoys high levels of national belonging and patriotism – the Kurdish case put aside. But obviously, the years of unsolved conflict that have been prevailing since 2011 triggered dynamics of territorial decomposition.²

Yemen, a country that was already divided up in the recent past between a Northern and a Southern part, also seems to be in the middle of a regressive dynamic. The Huthi phenomenon, the affirmation of al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the partial (re)affirmation of tribal dynamics as well a clear situation of war that opposes several sets of actors and their respective allies (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, probably Iran) question the future of Yemen's territorial cohesion.³

¹ Eugene Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East* (Basic Books: 2015) pp. 243-274.

² For regular updates on the state of play in Syria, see:
<http://www.understandingwar.org/project/syria-project>

³ See for example Peter Salisbury, *Federalism, Conflict and fragmentation in Yemen* (Saferworld, October 2015),
<http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail/?ots591=0c54e3b3-1e9c-be1e-2c24-a6a8c7060233&lng=en&id=194318>.

This report, similarly to many others that deal with Yemeni issues, consider timidly the possibility of witnessing a territorial fragmentation of Yemen, but they still consider it as a possibility.

In Libya, a country that was initially made up of three different regions, neither King Idriss nor Muammar Gaddafi have succeeded in overcoming differences and promoting a strong feeling of national belonging.⁴ The gap between different tribal actors, that Qaddafi manipulated in a divide and rule strategy, caused chaos after the fall of Qaddafi and jeopardized the cohesion of the territory.⁵

In Iraq, matters of division had preceded the Arab Spring for a long time. Indeed, the Gulf War (1991) and important facts that followed (the imposition of no-fly zones extending respectively from the 36th parallel Northwards and the 32nd parallel Southwards) allowed Iraq's Kurds to achieve a first grade of political autonomy. Following the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, a series of events and decisions - that included the policy of "de-Ba'athification"⁶ - combined with spreading violence, growing sectarianism as well as the persistence of nepotism, corruption and bad governance increased popular frustration. The less Iraqis felt represented by their national leaders, the more they became closer to local leaders. Since most of these local leaders are religious or tribal personalities that pretend to a political role, their importance ended up widening the gap between the population and national leaders. Sectarianism grew in parallel, and so did the risk of territorial divisions that would separate Kurds from Sunnis and Shias.⁷

⁴ See Dirk Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 43-76.

⁵ International Crisis Group, "Libya: Getting Geneva Right," Middle East and North Africa Report No. 157, Feb. 26, 2015, [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/North%20Africa/libya/157-libya-getting-geneva-right](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/North%20Africa/libya/157-libya-getting-geneva-right)

⁶ A policy by which the Coalition Provisional Authority – Iraq's interim government that followed the fall of former President Saddam Hussein's regime - decided to remove public sector employees affiliated with the Ba'ath party from their positions.

⁷ See Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 143-204.

The rise of armed militias:

The coercive methods used by the military and by security forces in general against populations and the impunity that they were given by authoritarian leaders are among the factors that led to the Arab uprisings. But paradoxically, we have also learnt from Latin American transitions that the conditions for benefitting from a non-chaotic transition may require considering an important role for the military.⁸

In Tunisia as well as in Egypt, the ousting of former presidents Ben Ali and Mubarak followed popular demands and demonstrations, but this outcome was rather made possible thanks to the intervention of the army; the transition process that followed also suggested a strong role and/or presence for the army, as highlighted by the way president Mohammed Morsi was ousted too in 2013.⁹

In Libya, as well as in Iraq before, the absence of a strong army contributed to the weakening of both countries' future prospects. Certainly, there were difficult factors and political objectives, and hence levels of responsibility, that propelled authorities in Libya and Iraq, to weaken their armies. Hence, in both cases, limited or weak state sovereignty as well as the difficulties to guarantee security via the role of an efficient military led in return to the mushrooming of militias.

Militias also emerged in Syria, with some defending the regime while others forming opposition groups. But though the Syrian regime lost considerable parts of its territories, one of the reasons why it has been able to remain in power is it controls the army. While in Yemen too, the army's difficulties to maintain the state's sovereignty on the whole territory gave room for the emergence of several new powerful actors, including militias.

⁸ See Rut Diamint, Barah Mikail, "Militaries, Civilians and Democracy in the Arab World," FRIDE, Policy Brief 112, January 2012,

http://fride.org/download/PB_112_Militaries_civilians_democracy.pdf

⁹ "Egypt Crisis: Army Ousts President Mohammad Morsi," *BBC*, Jul. 4, 2013 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-23173794>

Taken as a whole, these examples illustrate how much the strength of the army conditions the possibility for militarized non-state actors known as militias to strengthen. The paradox lies in the fact that in several countries of the MENA region, the quest of people for security allowed the military to claim an important role; but at the same time, the strong presence of the military in both the business and the political fields questions the sustainability of such situations in the long term. Indeed, the military may be able to take advantage of popular fears that are generated by the current regional unrest to maintain a dominant role, but the uprisings of 2011 and beyond also created a new reality that makes it hard for populations to accept endless military rule.

The (alleged) Sunni-Shia rift:

Talking about the existence of a “Sunni-Shia rift” is nothing new. Historical longstanding disagreements put aside¹⁰, the revival of this inter-Islamic issue came back with the Iranian Islamic Revolution (1979). The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) that followed, as well as the aborted attempt by the U.S. to replace Saddam Hussein following the Gulf War (1991), were due in great part to the fears that many Arab and Western countries had of Iranian attempts to export a “Shia revolution” to the rest of the region.¹¹

The invasion of Iraq (2003) reinforced these same fears. Three countries known for being the U.S.’s closest Arab allies – Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia - criticized the Bush Administration in 2004 for implementing a regional strategy that would favor the rising of a “Shia

¹⁰ For a good and balanced explanation of the historical roots of the “Sunni-Shia conflict”, read Hichem Djaït, *La Grande Discorde : Religion et Politique dans l’Islam des Origines* (Folio Histoire, 2008).

¹¹ See , “La question de la *Marja’iyya* chiite”, IRIS, 2006, http://www.iris-france.org/docs/consulting/2006_chiite.pdf

crescent.”¹² In 2007, the “Sahwa”¹³ strategy was launched. In 2011, it was clear that Iran had gained considerable influence in the MENA region. Gulf accusations about Iran’s involvement in Bahrain and Yemen often lack strong evidence but Tehran has reached a critical and very influential role and physical presence in both Iraq and Syria.¹⁴

There is a geopolitical reading that prevails in these issues. Iran and many Arab states (starting with Saudi Arabia) are engaged in a race for political leadership in the region, but their priority goes into building alliances that would preserve both their influence and their national and strategic interests. This state of play can generate damaging situations too. The Arab Spring has confirmed a tendency that we had already noticed with the invasion of Iraq: the growing weakness of some of the region’s state institutions, as stressed today in the examples of Libya, Yemen and previously Lebanon and the Palestinian territories.¹⁵ The loss of state sovereignty can easily provoke sectarian reactions in return: people are seeking a strong referent that would guarantee them political existence and security. This shift from strong feelings of national belonging to alternative situations also risks encouraging sectarianism in general and Sunni-Shia tensions in particular.

¹² Kevin Mazur, “The “Shia Crescent” and Arab State Legitimacy”, *SAIS Review of International Affairs*, Volume 29, Number 2, Summer-Fall 2009, https://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/sais_review/v029/29.2.mazur.pdf

¹³ “Sahwa” was a strategy developed by the U.S. in 2007 and 2008. It was based on the idea of giving military means to Iraqi Sunni tribes to make sure that they would not join the ranks of al-Qaeda. Such a strategy increased attitudes of mutual defiance between Sunnis and Shiites. The same situation prevails today, since the Obama administration has favoured the idea of developing a similar “Sunni-based” strategy to fight Daesh, bringing in return criticism from the Iraqi (so-called “Shia-led”) government.

¹⁴ Casa Árabe, “Iraq en la encrucijada”, conference organised on Nov. 24. 2015, <http://www.casaarabe.es/eventos-arabes/show/iraq-en-la-encrucijada>

¹⁵ While one could also add the case of Syria to this list, it may also be argued that despite its losing large swaths of territory, the Syrian regime remains strong from an institutional point of view.

Indeed, culture and religion preceded the creation of contemporary political borders in the MENA region. Populations that fear for their security generally seek protection by engaging more with the members of their own religious communities. These automatisms combined with the degree of tension and the regional rivalries that prevail between so-called “Sunni Saudi Arabia” and “Shia Iran” are part of the reason why sectarianism gave the impression that it was on the rise.

However, the idea of the existence of a global and irremediable fight between Sunnis and Shias needs to be approached with many nuances. Obviously, to pretend that sectarian tensions are absent from the region’s dynamics would be denying facts: there are several examples of conflict between Sunnis to Shias – as well as other religious communities – and this tendency seems to have grown considerably over the last decade. Today, this is particularly evident in Syria, where local dynamics (conflict between sectarian groups) combined with the way these same groups reflect regional divergences (some are backed by “Sunni” Gulf states while others are supported by “Shia” Iran and Iraq) end up giving the impression that sectarian prospects are shaping the conflict. But there is still room for believing that Syria will not necessarily end up being split along sectarian lines, and sectarianism will not necessarily extend considerably in the MENA region. Today, sectarian conflicts remain by far the exception rather than the rule, and most of them occur in places where Saudi-Iranian rivalry prevails. From this perspective, the idea of a broad return of the “Sunni Shia divide” to the region is mainly exaggerated, for the time being at least.

Radical ideologies on national grounds:

There are several degrees and types of radicalisms in the MENA region. The trends that we witnessed since 2011 came mainly through the examples of religion-based national movements and religious associations.

The Arab Spring gave Islamic political organizations the opportunity to seize power. Cases of Islamic rule put aside (such as in the case of the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council), such a trend had already been demonstrated in the Palestinian territories when Hamas won the January 2006 legislative elections. But the Arab Spring created a new context. In Tunisia (al-Nahda) as well as in Egypt (the Muslim Brotherhood), Islamist movements and organizations gained power after having been banned for decades.

Similarly, Salafi parties and movements also benefitted from the post-2011 context. In Egypt and in Tunisia, they were able to make a showing on the streets and participate to elections.¹⁶ In Tunisia, more than in Egypt, this came as a surprise. Ben Ali's rule was characterized, officially speaking at least, by the absence of Salafi organizations. Besides its social significance, this fact becomes important as Salafis – as opposed ideologically and/or politically to Islamists that represent the Muslim Brotherhood – emerged as possible kingmakers, as was the case in Egypt.¹⁷ But Salafis were not the only actors to prevail in the post-2011 landscape. Indeed, religious associations with no official political aspirations also increased their power over the last years. This tendency also has a lot to do – in part at least – with the funding strategies that are adopted by some countries and/or official regional religious establishments towards such ideologies and movements, such as the ones originating from some Gulf state (Qatar in regards to Syria or Libya) and/or private donors (Kuwait and the alleged connections of some of its businessmen with Daesh).

¹⁶ The affirmations of this paragraph do not mean that Tunisian and Egyptian Salafis can be put on the same level. There are obvious and strong nuances (history, ideological orientations and beliefs, concrete objectives) that make Egyptian Salafis different from the Tunisian ones.

¹⁷ For more on Salafis in the MENA region and the way they position themselves towards contemporary issues including the rise of Islamic State, see Joas Wagemakers, "Salafi Ideas on State-Building Before and After the Rise of the Islamic State", in *Islamism in the IS Age*, POMEPS Studies 12, Mar. 17, 2015, http://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/POMEPS_Studies_12_ISAge_Web.pdf

Nevertheless, none of the cases where Islamist movements have risen to power ended up being promising. In Egypt, the unrest that followed the now deposed Mohammed Morsi's rise to power provoked additional rifts within the population; in Tunisia, a similar situation prevailed before new parliamentary elections were organized at the end of 2014. Each of these examples brings its own explanation when it comes to stressing why violence followed. In Egypt, the lack of experience of Morsi and his quest to concentrate power in his hands led to popular riots that made it easy for the army to topple him; in Tunisia, the assassination in 2013 of important "anti-Islamist" figures (Chokri Belaid, Mohammed Brahmi) gave more weight to anti-Nahda demonstrators and their demands for organizing new elections. Even in Morocco, where an Islamist party (the Party of Justice and Development) rose to power in 2011 following regular elections, the political crisis that occurred in 2013 forced the ruling party to consider forming a new coalition with its opponents in October of the same year. The paradox of the MENA region is that while Islamist movements may end up being chosen democratically, they generate so much controversy that they become hardly able to hold on to power. One of the implications of this situation is ongoing in Libya, where divisions between actors that belong to either the "Islamist" or the "non-Islamist" camp are clearly undermining prospects for rapprochement between warring factions and the populations under their control.

Religious/sectarian challenges and terrorism:

The Arab Spring did not create a terrorist reality per se. While 9/11 proved that groups similar to al-Qaeda were able to carry attacks beyond the MENA region, the origins of such organizations were known before. The support that had been provided, mainly by the US and some of its allies (Saudi Arabia, Pakistan), to the anti-Soviet

Mudjahideen in Afghanistan during the 1980s planted the seeds of what would become al-Qaeda.¹⁸

The existence of Daesh (Islamic State) cannot be separated from a global context in which some actors decided to deal in their own way with regional issues. Obviously, the attitude of some regimes gave more room for the spread of jihadism. In the early stages of the Arab Spring, the release¹⁹ by both the Egyptian Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) and the Syrian regime²⁰ of prisoners that included jihadists allowed them to instrumentalize the issue of religious radicalism in a move that was most probably meant to de-legitimize popular demonstrations and to impede their success.

However, whatever governmental moves ended up helping them, jihadist organizations can also be approached and analyzed as autonomous structures that also have a history of their own. Indeed, Daesh claims political autonomy, but its creation and its rise has been possible thanks to a similar organization that preceded its existence: al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 created a political void that allowed al-Qaeda to grow in the country; its existence has been guaranteed thanks to both a US-led focus on the necessity of tracking al-Qaeda and terrorism in general, and violent attacks that provoked the death of numerous innocent people. While the strategy of counter-insurgency that was developed in Iraq by the US from 2007 onwards succeeded in weakening al-Qaeda considerably, it did not however put an end to the “al-Qaeda spirit” or “ideology.” In other words, while many post-9/11 analyses believed that the act of joining al-Qaeda was first and foremost a religious commitment explained best by the rules and principles of Islam, the Arab Spring proved things to be far more complicated. Many

¹⁸ See for example Alex Strick Van Linschoten, Felix Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created: The Myth of the Taliban/Al-Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan, 1970-2010* (C. Hurst & Co. Publishers Ltd., 2012).

¹⁹ Hossam Bahgat, “Who Let the Jihadis Out?”, *Mada Masr*, Feb. 16, 2014, <http://www.madamasr.com/sections/politics/who-let-jihadis-out>

²⁰ “How Syria’s Assad Helped Forge ISIS,” *Newsweek*, Jun. 21, 2014, <http://www.newsweek.com/how-syrias-assad-helped-forge-isis-255631>

members of al-Qaeda, Daesh and/or similar organizations may have their decisions motivated by religious beliefs and an erroneous reading of the Quran and the principles of Islam. However, the possible quest by the members of these same radical organizations of an alternative to the political and social systems they live in may also be a strong driver that we often end up underestimating.

Indeed, the Arab Spring has witnessed the appearance of situations where political voids were created and/or newly emerging regimes had difficulty exerting sovereignty in their national territories. This context gave room for radical organizations' as we can see in Libya, Syria, Iraq as well as the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt. While such groups take advantage of a political and/or military void, their coverage in the media also explains in part why their strategies of recruitment are successful. Whether they come from these same countries or are from Western regions, the people that join these organizations seem to be looking first and foremost for alternatives to the political systems in which they live. This existential quest happens to favor radical groups who claim that they represent popular demands.

Nevertheless, claiming that Daesh, al-Qaeda et al. and similar organizations represent the reality of an intrinsically violent Middle East is erroneous. Even when radical organizations are important in terms of members, they still represent a meaningless percentage of the population of the Arab world. Furthermore, their claims and their actions clearly bring strong Arab and Muslim criticism and popular rejection.

Is the MENA Region Intrinsically Violent?

The violence witnessed in the MENA region will not last forever. But instability and threats – and hence possible further violence - will most likely keep violence present for some time. However, most if not all of elements leading to violence have to be read from a rational perspective: contemporary violence in the MENA region is linked to an accumulation of popular frustrations that is also linked to the

erroneous policies that have been developed by several regional and international governments.

The political legitimacy of states and governments:

The degrees of political legitimacy of MENA regimes and governments determine to a large extent how popular frustrations appear, are maintained, and at time become violent. Before the Arab Spring, any attempt to criticize or to challenge Arab regimes and/or leaders was met with governmental repression. Even countries where regimes and/or governments have changed (Lebanon, Iraq), have lacked strong political structures and/or a strong rule of law that would satisfy the populations' needs.

With the Arab Spring, countries where elections were organized (Tunisia, Egypt) did not immediately stabilize: results for elections were often challenged, and in some cases, there were suspicions that state forces had played a major role in engineering the results.²¹ These suspicions and criticisms led to new elections, a coups d'état, or both. In the rest of the region, popular demands for change saw regimes entrench their power (Oman, Morocco), and were followed by instability and/or signs of territorial fragmentation (Libya, Syria, Yemen).

In all of these countries, confrontations between public authorities and the population resulted in violence. Protests and their possible violent outcomes are the same in the MENA region compared to the rest of the world. The clashes between populations that want concrete change and regimes that want to hold to power are the origin for the violence we see in the streets. And even then, it is generally the nature of the governmental reaction to such protests that provokes violent outcomes. Whilst some governments (Syria, Egypt) claim that they alone can save populations from terrorist and/or extremist groups, the existence of the latter – or the absence of their total eradication, for the

²¹ Hossam Bahgat, "Anatomy of an Election," *Mada Masr*, Mar. 14, 2016
<http://www.madamasr.com/sections/politics/anatomy-election>

time being at least – gives most Arab regimes further possibilities to hang on to power.

Indeed, extremism, terrorism, and the successful recruitment strategies that benefit violent and/or radical groups are linked in great part to the absence of viable solutions for populations (see next section) and are also linked to governmental policies of repression against populations and the way they lead to social and/or popular radicalization. Even in Egypt, the political exclusion of the Muslim Brotherhood and the heavy-handed repression against its members can only lead to a dramatic radicalization of the movement's popular basis, while what is required are policies and decisions that encourage compromise. Here too, cynically, many MENA regimes may be willing to provoke such a radicalization so that they feel legitimized in return.

Social and economic causes for radicalism:

Social and economic causes also condition scenarios of violence in the MENA region, which were clear even before the Arab Spring. In 2008, in Egypt, the long months of strikes by Mahalla's textile workers was motivated by demands for better economic conditions. In 2008, in Tunisia, a similar movement occurred in the mining region of Gafsa, where protesters demonstrated against socio-economic conditions.²² Mohammed Bouazizi's self-immolation was also had socio-economic roots. Furthermore, the demonstrations during the Arab Spring reached countries and areas where people were suffering economic problems rather than countries where revenues per capita were relatively high.²³

²² For an analysis of these movements, see Joel Beinin, Frédéric Vairel, *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa* (Stanford University Press, 2011).

²³ For an overview of the main indicators that stood up to 2011, see the World Bank's MENA report *Investing for Growth and Jobs*, September 2011, http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTMENA/Resources/World_Bank_MENA_Economic_Developments_Prospects_Sept2011.pdf

Socio-economic frustration can therefore be a driver of radicalism. Some protest movements may use religion as a driver, but we must consider that the initial frustration of the demonstrators that end up joining religious movements and organizations is most likely socially and/or economically motivated in its first stages at least. Religious organizations will always benefit from a core group of supporters; nevertheless, the recent examples of Egypt and Tunisia also prove that such parties and movements can depend in large part on swing votes and voters.

Before making their political choices, people in the MENA region are mainly motivated by their quest for alternatives to the regimes and to the laws under which they live. The violence that characterized the Arab Spring is everything but abnormal. Whether we agree on calling these processes “revolutionary” or not, the fact is that popular quests for change rarely – if ever – happen without violence. This tends to be the case in particular when people expressing new perspectives face repression.

Thinking Forward: the New MENA Region:

Throughout history, Arab governments instrumentalized violence to appear as saviors. Whenever people went to the streets asking for better conditions, they were met with repression and, most of the time, accusations that they were being manipulated from the outside. MENA regimes are also good at accusing “jihadists” of being behind such movements, especially when they fear their future. Muammar Gaddafi blamed al-Qaida for the 2011 uprising in Libya²⁴ while Bashar al-Assad referred several times to foreign conspiracies²⁵ when referring to violence in Syria.

²⁴ BBC, Interview with Muammar Gaddafi, Mar. 1, 2011, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-12607478>

²⁵ See for example BBC, “Syria’s Bashar al-Assad blames “foreign conspiracy”, Jan. 10, 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-16483548>

Today the MENA region stands at a crossroads. On the one hand, the popular movements that sounded so promising in 2011 did not result in a renewal of the political elites: civil society movements exist to varying degrees; they are mobilized, but they still need to prove they can have a strong impact on society. On the other hand, violence is part of the regional landscape, where acts and attacks carried out by groups motivated by religious purposes (Daesh, Ansar al-Sharia, al-Qaida and its offshoots) are undoubtedly on the rise. This only makes it urgent to determine how it could be possible to overcome violence without giving the authorities the opportunity to abuse anyone they accuse of being an “enemy of the nation.”

Finding solutions to the MENA region’s many dilemmas is far from easy, especially at a moment when some of the violence that we have witnessed in European countries complicates the matter. The Paris attacks on November 13, 2015 were followed by a series of governmental decisions that did not fit either with the idea of favoring citizens, CSMs and democracy. Indeed, in a move that was meant to prove that it was reacting efficiently to these attacks, the French government favored the adoption of tough security measures. France is now hitting hard on Daesh’s positions in Syria, while it proclaimed a state of emergency for a period of three months. It is hard to believe that such measures will prove effective when most of the people responsible for the Paris attacks seem to be individuals that grew up and were radicalized in France. The military and/or security measures that France has adopted as a response to the attacks of November 13 contradict Paris’s push for democracy, political transparency and more respect for human and citizens rights in the MENA region. The same can be said about most of the members of the EU: they happen to be going through a moment where they feel that anything that can help counter “terrorism” is justified. The problem is that while the legal definition of terrorism remains broad, most of these countries seem to be forgetting that fighting radicalization also needs the development of social policies that would help limit social frustrations and their violent outcomes.

While there is no easy or quick solution for the MENA's multiple challenges, the fact is that violence is increasingly characterizing the region, while the roots of the violence are ignored. Daesh may have been rendered possible by both the previous existence of al-Qaida and the failure of the Arab transitions but this does not explain why this organization encountered so much success. Iraqis, Libyans, Syrians, Tunisians and even Yemenis may have reacted to the Arab Spring without having political experience but this does not explain why, the Tunisian case put aside, transitions in all these countries failed.

In fact, everything indicates that, whatever pro-democratic intentions Western countries may have, they are still unable to resist the idea that strong and tough leaderships would be needed to counter radicalism and violence. The paradox of such an approach is that it nurtures more violence in return. Indeed, many examples in the MENA region show us how the links that exist between local actors and their external backers also provoke more conflicts and struggles in return. Likewise, the way states try to fight terrorist organizations favors the use of hard power, at the expense of soft power; the result is more frustration on the ground, and wider audiences for organizations such as Daesh.

Violence in the MENA region cannot be understood independently from one of the reasons that generated it: the failed policies that the most important financial backers and commercial partners of the MENA countries have favored. For decades, Western countries have been calling for more political reforms and transparency, but they never made these a cornerstone for their relations with the MENA region. With the Arab Spring, Westerners claimed that they wanted to work with civil societies but the results of such a commitment still have to be proved. This does not mean that the people and the governments of the MENA region should not take responsibility themselves; change always has to start with oneself, and on this point, there is more scope for considerable improvement.

Therefore, while violence in the MENA region can never be justified, it has to be considered for what it really is: the result of a collective failure that includes Arabs and their governments. The good news is that we understand the absurdity of the theories that consider the MENA region as intrinsically and “genetically” violent; this theory is developed generally by people who read the MENA region through an erroneous reading of Islam - a reading similar to Jihadist organizations. The bad news is that it will remain hard to change the situation as long as contemporary governments and political structures remain focused on both their current priorities – security – and the types of “solutions” they envision for them – these are generally based on policies that dismiss citizenship rights and generate more insecurity and violence.

To put an end to violence in the MENA region, we need a set of conditions including a renewal of the MENA region’s political elites. But such renewed prospects may also be needed for many Western countries if we want policies that could face today’s challenges .