Outlook and Opportunities in the MENA Region

Farrah Hawana

Analytics and Options for the Swiss MENA Strategy

Geneva Centre for Security Policy

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About the Author and Contributors

Farrah Hawana is an independent researcher and freelance consultant who finished her Ph.D. in Political Science/International Relations at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in 2016. In 2006, she completed an M.A. degree in International Conflict Analysis at the University of Kent's Brussels School of International Studies in Belgium. Her undergraduate degrees in History and International Relations were awarded by the College of William and Mary in 2004. Farrah has accumulated extensive professional experience over more than fifteen years of work with various non-governmental organizations, international institutions, and academic research/policy centers, such as the International Labour Organization and the Small Arms Survey. Most recently, she was a Lecturer in International Politics & Security at Aberystwyth University, where she taught courses and supervised dissertations at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. She is broadly interested in exploring questions of power, legitimacy, security, and justice, and in understanding complex political change, with specific focus on the Middle East and North Africa.

The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP) and the Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP) of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (IHEID) jointly convened an expert workshop on the outlook and opportunities in the MENA region. The workshop united international experts to assess the situation in the region, with the aim to develop policy options and recommendations for the next Swiss MENA Strategy.

This project was led by **Maréva Roduit**, Project Officer at the Research and Policy Advice Department, GCSP.

List of Contributing Workshop Participants

Mr Hassan ABULENEIN, Government Engagement Lead, Middle East and North Africa, Centre for Trade, Regions and Geopolitics, World Economic Forum

Dr Maryam ALEMZADEH, Associate Professor in the History and Politics of Iran, University of Oxford

Ms Rim AL JABI, MENA Gender Advisor, Search for Common Ground

Dr Souhail BELHADJ-KLAZ, Research Associate, Centre on Conflict Development and Peacebuilding, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies

Dr Riccardo BOCCO, Emeritus Professor, Anthropology and Sociology Faculty Associate, Centre on Conflict Development and Peacebuilding, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies

Colonel Christian BUHLMANN (PhD), Director of Centre Support and Development, Geneva Centre for Security Policy

Ms Natasha CARMI, Lead Water Specialist, Geneva Water Hub

Mr Andrea CELLINO, Senior Fellow at MEIS, the Middle East Institute Switzerland and Executive-in-Residence, Global Fellowship Initiative, Geneva Centre for Security Policy

Dr Jerome DREVON, Senior Analyst on Jihad and Modern Conflict, International Crisis Group

Ms Seraina ELDADA, Project Officer, Mediation and Peace Support Department, Geneva Centre for Security Policy

Dr Maria Luisa FANTAPPIE, Visiting Fellow Middle East Centre, London School of Economics

Ambassador Marc GEORGE, Senior Diplomatic Advisor, International Security Dialogue Department, Geneva Centre for Security Policy

Ambassador Thomas GREMINGER, Executive Director, Geneva Centre for Security Policy

Mr Jalel HARCHAOUI, Associate Fellow, Royal United Services Institute

Mr Peter HARLING, Founder and Director, Synaps

Dr Farrah HAWANA, Research Associate, Centre on Conflict Development and Peacebuilding, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies

Mr Nadim HOURY, Executive Director, Arab Reform Initiative

Professor Lina KHATIB, Director, SOAS Middle East Institute

Professor Keith KRAUSE, Director, Centre on Conflict Development and

Peacebuilding, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies

Dr Anca MUNTEANU, Course Director, Geneva Centre for Security Policy

Dr Jean-Marc RICKLI, Head of Global and Emerging Risks, Geneva Centre for Security Policy

Dr Carole RIZKALLAH ALSHARABATI, Director of the Institute of Political Science, Saint Joseph University

Ms Maréva RODUIT, Project Officer, Research and Policy Advice Department, Geneva Centre for Security Policy

Mr Bilal SALAYMEH, PhD Researcher in International Relations and Political Science, Centre on Conflict Development and Peacebuilding, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies

Dr Alaa TARTIR, Research Associate, Centre on Conflict Development and Peacebuilding, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies

Mr Alexander TYLER, Senior Liaison Officer, United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees

Ms Zoë VENETIS, Junior Professional Officer, Global Support Group, Geneva Centre for Security Policy

Mr Tobias VESTNER, Director of Research and Policy Advice Department, Geneva Centre for Security Policy

Dr Achim WENNMANN, Director of Strategic Partnerships and Senior Researcher, Centre on Conflict Development and Peacebuilding, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies

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1. Introduction

The 2011 Arab Uprisings heralded the start of a long-term period of uncertainty and transition in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region marked by rapid profound demographic, environmental, political, social, economic and cultural transformation. Although the pace, form, and consequences of these changes are not identical in all MENA countries, certain key changes are likely to affect future regional trajectories towards sustainable development, good governance, and fulfilment of Agenda 2030 goals and targets. Such complex, multidimensional regional shifts include:

- the changing nature and character of armed conflict and (geo)political rivalries;
- deteriorating governance and deepening corruption;
- ongoing humanitarian crises and high levels of migration and forced population displacement;
- regional demographic transformations and urbanisation trends;
- changing climatic conditions and resultant natural resource competition, in light of the threat multiplying effects of climate change and environmental degradation; and
- economic diversification of oil-based economies, while regional youth unemployment remains high and multiple non-oil-based economies remain in crisis.

The question at hand is whether regional governments and populations have the necessary resources and institutional capacities to constructively manage the consequences of these current transformations, with an eye towards returning the region to a state of equilibrium. Structural changes (demographic, environmental, political, etc.) do not necessarily have to be sources of endemic instability, compounding existing repression, injustice, and exclusion. Ongoing transformations may instead provide solutions and opportunities for regional governments, and for international donors hoping to exert a positive impact on human security and development, to cooperate in order to build a sustainable, inclusive future.

This study comprises three parts. First, the thematic analysis offers a comprehensive overview of the main trends and key issues shaping the immediate, medium-term, and long-term outlook for the MENA region. The analysis starts with an examination of selected trends and their potential implications at the sub-regional level, encompassing North Africa, the Near East, the Arabian Peninsula, and Iran. This is followed by a focused analysis of three thematic priority areas: peace, security, and human rights; migration and protecting populations in need; and sustainable development and climate change. Second, expert insights that arose during the workshop discussions are summarized and the main analytical elements are presented following the same thematic priority areas. Third, the final section presents a list of the main policy recommendations resulting from the expert workshop.

It is important to note that on 7 October, just one day after the workshop concluded, the status quo in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories drastically changed, putting populations in both countries (and in neighboring countries) at greater risk of immediate violence. The fluid crisis remains in flux and highly uncertain but is sure to have serious near-/medium-/long-term implications for the entire region and at all levels. **This study reflects the pre-7 October recommendations that were made by experts during workshop discussions only.** It has not been updated to account for these ongoing developments.

2. Thematic Analysis

2.1 Regional Trends Overview

After a short period of hope for greater democratic representation and political participation immediately following the 2011 Arab Uprisings,[1] it is clear today that multiple countries in the region have instead been experi-encing a period of **authoritarian resurgence**. This is demonstrated by the overriding obsession with regime survival[2] and elite reproduction[3] regularly displayed in practice across the region, and by relevant indicators[4] monitoring the shrinking space for civil society, ever-tightening restrictions on individual freedom,[5] and ongoing state repression, particularly against opposition groups, human rights defenders, dissidents, artists, and journalists,[6] among others—whether directly via state actors or indirectly via proxy non-state actors or militias[7]. Other common human rights violations in the region include discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities, enforced disappear-ances, torture and other ill-treatment,[8] and the use of the death penalty and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading punishments.[9] With a few exceptions, the overall situation in the MENA region is deteriorating, not improving, on a wide range of human rights dimensions.

Unresolved conflicts continue to structure regional relationships, rivalries, and policies in the MENA. Since 2011, however, the frequency and scale of existing conflicts has risen while conflicts have become increasingly inter-connected, with a multiplication of complex linkages in policy, practice, and rhetoric. One way to think about the intertwined conflicts in the region is to classify them

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1   Raymond Hinnebusch, "Change and Continuity after the Arab Uprising: The Consequences of State Formation in Arab North African States", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 42, no. 1 (2015) and "Historical Sociology and the Arab Uprising", *Mediterranean Politics* 19, no. 1 (2014); Michael Hudson, "Arab Politics after the Uprisings", in *Routledge of the Arab Spring* (Routledge Handbooks Online, 2014); Eva Bellin, "Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Lessons from the Arab Spring", *Comparative Politics* 44, no. 2 (2012): 127–49.

2   Hicham Bou Nassif, "Generals and autocrats: how coup-proofing predetermined the military elite's behavior in the Arab Spring", *Political Science Quarterly* 130, no. 2 (2015): 245-275 and *Endgames: Military response to protest in Arab autocracies* (Cambridge University Press, 2020); Steven Heydemann and Janet Ketcham, "The political ecology of authoritarian learning", *POMEPS Newsletter*, 2016; Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Leenders, "Authoritarian learning and counterrevolution", in *The Arab uprisings explained: New contentious politics in the Middle East* (Columbia University Press, 2014), 75-92; Oliver Schlumberger, *Puzzles of political change in the Middle East: Political liberalisation, authoritarian resilience and the question of systemic change.* Discussion Paper No. 5, 2021; Oliver Schlumberger, Mirjam Edel, Ahmed Maati, and Koray Saglam, "How Authoritarianism Transforms: A Framework for the Study of Digital Dictatorship", *Government and Opposition* (2023): 1-23; Oliver Schlumberger and T. Schedler, "Authoritarianisms and authoritarianization", in *The Sage Handbook of Political Science*, 3 (2020), 712-729; Scott Williamson and Beatriz Magaloni, "Legislatures and policy making in authoritarian regimes", *Comparative Political Studies* 53, no. 9 (2020): 1525-1543; Johannes Gerschewski, *The Two Logics of Autocratic Rule* (Cambridge University Press, 2023); Tom Ginsburg and Tamir Moustafa, *Rule by Law: The Politics of Courts in Authoritarian Regimes*, (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

3   Erik Vollmann, Miriam Bohn, Roland Sturm, and Thomas Demmelhuber, "Decentralisation as authoritarian upgrading? Evidence from Jordan and Morocco," *The Journal of North African Studies* 27, no. 2 (2022): 362-393; Francesco Cavatorta and Janine A. Clark, "Political and social mobilization in the Middle East and North Africa after the 2011 uprisings", *Globalizations* (2022): 1-14.

4   Amnesty International, "Middle East and North Africa 2022", webpage, 28 September 2023, https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/report-middle-east-and-north-africa/.

5   Middle East Eye, "Saudi Arabia Sentences Schoolgirl to 18 Years over Tweets, Says Rights Group", Middle East Eye, September 27, 2023, https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-arabia-sentences-schoolgirl-18-years-tweets.

6   United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, "Tunisia: restrictions against defenders, violence and reversal of gains", September 23, 2023, https://srdefenders.org/information/tunisia-restrictions-against-defenders-violence-and-reversal-of-gains/.

7   Vivian Yee, "Residents See Signs of Crackdown on Dissent After Libya Floods", *New York Times*, September 21, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/21/world/middleeast/libya-floods-derna-crackdown.html; Luke Harding, "Eastern Libya orders journalists out of flood-hit Derna after protests", *The Guardian*, September 19, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/19/eastern-libya-orders-journalists-flood-derna-protests-media-crackdown.

8   MENA Rights Group, "International Day in Support of Victims of Torture: MENA states must end practice and hold perpetrators accountable", open letter, 26 June 2023: http://menarights.org/en/articles/international-day-support-victims-torture-mena-states-must-end-practice-and-hold.

9   Amnesty International, "Middle East and North Africa 2022".

over time along five axes or historical "clusters" of intersecting conflict,[10] which remain unresolved and have grown more complex since 2011. The *first* cluster is rooted in the colonial era, and stems from the perceived illegitimacy of modern borders, ideological contestation, and identity-based conflicts (various forms of contestation based on perceived illegitimacy of regional states, including transnational armed groups, terrorism, and violent extremism); the *second* cluster, from the ethnic cleansing of Palestine that began in 1948 and continues in the form of the Israeli occupation (Arab-Israeli wars, ongoing occupation of Palestinian territories, stark divide between pro-Palestinian public opinions and pro-normalisation governments); the *third* cluster, from the implications of the 1979 Iranian revolution (Lebanon sectarianism and Hezbollah, the Iran-Iraq War, long-term Arabian Peninsula rivalries and threat perceptions, rising sectarianism after the 2003 Iraq invasion/occupation); the *fourth* cluster, from the Sunni response to the Iranian revolution (rising sectarianism and promotion of extremist ideologies and Sunni religious interpretations abroad, 1980s Afghanistan and trans-national jihadist movements); and the *fifth* cluster, from the chronic political uncertainty and (internationalised) civil conflicts triggered by the 2011 Arab Uprisings (Libya, Syria, Yemen).

These five major clusters highlight the deep-seated and almost intractable nature of many of the region's conflict dynamics. Alongside them are various other unresolved conflicts such as those between neighbours (e.g., Algeria and Morocco, Western Sahara), tensions introduced and amplified by large-scale refugee migration flows and long-term humanitarian crises, and various negative environmental effects foreshadowing the expected rise of a *new cluster* in the coming years: conflicts arising from competition over natural resources, especially water, and from the multidimensional consequences of environmental degradation and food insecurity, including climate-induced migration.

From 2011 to 2021, renewed international geopolitical competition and intensified regional rivalries have complicated and aggravated these pre-existing conflicts in general, making them more difficult to resolve. Conflicts[11] are also complicated by the increasing involvement of various private military and security companies,[12] which are often used as instruments of national policy and geopolitical competition (e.g., Wagner/Russia; American firms). Along with the effects of natural disasters and other external shocks, regional conflict and insecurity are why it was the world's largest source region of refugees in 2020.[13] According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the region hosted 2.4 million of refugees, 12.6 million internally displaced people (IDPs), 251,800 asylum-seekers, and 370,300 stateless people at the end of 2022.[14] These UNHCR estimates do not take into account long-term Palestinian refugees, data regarding which are subject to different data collection challenges. In 2021 it was estimated that approximately 9.17 million of the 14 million Palestinians worldwide

10   Joost Hiltermann, "Tackling the intersecting conflicts in the MENA region", speech, January 20, 2020, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/tackling-intersecting-conflicts-mena-region.

11   ACLED (Armed Conflict and Location Event Data Project), "ACLED Regional Overview-Middle East June 2023", July 2023, https://acleddata.com/2023/07/06/regional-overview-middle-east-june-2023/.

12   Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), "Introduction", in *SIPRI Yearbook 2022* (Oxford University Press, 2022).

13   International Organization for Migration, *World Migration Report 2022* (Geneva: 2021), 321, https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2022.

14   UNHCR-provided basic needs assistance, cash support, and shelter for the region accounted for 24% of UNHCR's annual budget; see https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/regions/middle-east-and-north-africa and https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/statistics/.

(65.5%) are forcibly displaced persons, of which 8.36 million are refugees and some 812,000 are internally displaced.[15] Of an estimated total of over 8 million Palestinian refugees, around one million displaced in 1948 and one million displaced in 1967 have not been officially registered.[16] The United Nations Relief Works Agency (UNRWA) estimated in 2018 that there were at least 5.5 million UNRWA-registered Palestinian refugees located in different host countries just in the Near East (occupied Palestinian territories, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria).[17] In 2021, the number of UNRWA-registered Palestinian refugees was estimated to be 5.8 million.

Alongside authoritarian resurgence and persistent, unresolved conflict (Libya, Yemen, Syria, Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, Lebanon, Iraq) and areas of insecurity around the region and in neighbouring regions (Sahara Sahel, Sudan, Horn of Africa), militarisation[18] and arms proliferation by state and non-state actors have also continued since the Strategy was adopted. Some countries remain engaged in a conventional **arms** build-up that has intensified since 2011, as indicated by the rising levels of arms imports and relatively high levels of military spending.[19] For example, in the period 2015-2019, several of the world's top arms importers were from the region and accounted for over 20% of global imports (Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, United Arab Emirates/UAE, Qatar); in this period, Saudi Arabia alone absorbed 12% of global arms exports, becoming the top arms importer and doubling its previous 2010-2014 rate, which itself represented a 130% increase from the pre-2010 period.[20] In 2022, the region accounted for approximately 31% of global arms imports and Saudi Arabia remained the top global importer and highest regional spender.[21]

Shifting geopolitical and regional rivalries, unresolved armed conflicts, and the fight against terrorism and violent extremism drive regional demand for arms, as well as recurrent need to replace, maintain, or upgrade weapons systems over time. Driven by deeply rooted, complex threat perceptions in a volatile regional environmental, powerful regional states show little inclination to slow arms imports, despite the clear negative impact on sustainable development outcomes and public welfare in the region.[22] Instead, many regional states (e.g., Egypt, Iran, Israel, UAE, Saudi Arabia) appear to be interested in acquiring and/ or producing new technologies being developed for military use and for use in domestic surveillance (e.g., drones, artificial intelligence, robotics, cyber capability).

15   BADIL Resource Center, *Survey of Palestinian Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons 2019-2021, Volume X* (Bethlehem: 2022), xvii, https://www.badil.org/cached_uploads/view/2022/10/31/surveybrochure-web-eng-1667211047.pdf.

16   Francesca Albanese and Ardi Imseis, "The UN Mandate Toward the Palestinian Refugees: The Legal Imperatives of a Moral Responsi-bility", in Bocco and Froehlich, with Hawana (eds), *UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees Challenges for Developing a Strategic Vision* (Geneva: Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, 2022), 22.

17   Luigi Achilli and Sari Hanafi, "Migration Trends of Palestinian Refugees Registered with UNRWA," in Bocco and Froehlich, with Hawana (eds), *UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees*, 144-145.

18   Anna Stavrianakis and Jan Selby, eds., *Militarism and International Relations: Political Economy, Security, Theory,* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

19   SIPRI, *SIPRI Yearbook 2023*, (Oxford University Press, 2023), https://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2023; International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 2023* (Routledge, 2023), https://www.iiss.org/publications/the-military-balance/.

20   Charles Dunne, "The Arms Trade in the MENA Region: Drivers and Dangers", June 17, 2020, https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-arms-trade-in-the-mena-region-drivers-and-dangers/.

21   SIPRI, "Introduction."

22   Control Arms, "Goals not Guns: How the sustainable development goals and the arms trade are interlinked", *ATT Monitor*, 2017, https://attmonitor.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/ATT-Monitor_Goals-not-Guns-Case-Study_ENG_final_ONLINE-1.pdf. "Even in countries not actively engaged in conflict, considerable defence budgets are aimed at others in the region – such as the Gulf countries' spending in Yemen." Transparency International, "CPI 2022 For Middle East & North Africa: Corruption Fuels Ongoing Conflict", January 31, 2023, https://www.transparency.org/en/news/cpi-2022-middle-east-north-africa-corruption-fuels-ongoing-conflict.

However, since 2021 there has been some positive movement towards greater cooperation in regional conflict management, notably renewed diplomatic efforts **to de-escalate and lower tensions**: ongoing reconciliation between Qatar and Saudi Arabia; the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia in March 2023, in a deal brokered by China[23]; and renewed diplomatic initiatives to normalise relations with Israel and with the Syrian government of Bashar al Assad.[24] These normalisation efforts with Israel and Syria, however, are driven by elite and regime security concerns, and remain highly controversial and unpopular in broad segments of regional public opinion.[25] Their negotiation and consequences will have future implications for the credibility and legitimacy of participating regional governments, as well as their international supporters, particularly among refugees, IDPs, and young people.

This complicated politico-security situation did not appear overnight in the MENA region. Rather, it evolved over decades and stems from chronically weak and inefficient political, economic, and social governance, corruption, lack of transparency, and mismanagement of public resources by successive governments that have been engaged in longstanding regional rivalries and entrenched competition over time, both with/via other state actors and with/via (transnational and domestic) non-state actors.[26] The particular history of state formation[27] in the region—from to the colonial era, through the post-World War II period of decolonisation and the Cold War era, to the contemporary era shaped by post-Cold War multilateralism and the many negative consequences of the Global War on Terror[28]—has entrenched dysfunctional regional dynamics alongside harmful state governing logics of securitisation, repression, and exclusion that structure life for regional populations and extract high costs.

These **historical legacies** also shape contemporary regional inter-state and state-regime-society dynamics, which manifest today in the form of deep-rooted sociopolitical tensions and lack of social cohesion; inveterate insti-tutional weakness; structural violence, inequality, and exclusion; ineffective public service provision; economic crises; chronic underdevelopment; and environmental mismanagement.[29] Corruption, which was a main driver of the 2011 Arab Uprisings

23 International Crisis Group, "How Beijing helped Riyadh and Tehran Reach a Detente", March 17, 2023, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa-saudi-arabia-iran-china/how-beijing-helped-riyadh-and-tehran-reach-detente.

24 Nadeen Ebrahim, "Syria's drug problem casts shadow over Assad's rehabilitation", *CNN*, September 30, 2023, https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/syria-s-drug-problem-casts-shadow-over-assad-s-rehabilitation/ar-AA1hrMCE#image=1; Steven Heydemann, "Assads normalization and the politics of erasure in Syria", Brookings, January 17, 2022, Assad's normalization and the politics of erasure in Syria | Brookings, and "Syria's normalization signals a new Middle Eastern order", Brookings, March 10, 2023, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/syrias-normalization-signals-a-new-middle-eastern-order/.

25 The Arab Barometer, https://www.arabbarometer.org/. See also: Michaelle Browers, *Political Ideology in the Arab World: Accommodation and Transformation* (Cambridge University Press, 2009); Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (University of Chicago Press, 1999) and *Authoritarian apprehensions: Ideology, judgment, and mourning in Syria* (University of Chicago Press, 2019); Morten Valbjørn and Raymond Hinnebusch, "Exploring the Nexus between sectarianism and regime formation in a New Middle East: Theoretical points of departure", *Studies In Ethnicity and Nationalism* 19, no. 1 (2019): 2-22; Adeed Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair* (Princeton University Press, 2009).

26 Marina Eleftheriadou, "Non-state armed actors and contested sovereignties in internationalized civil wars: the case of Yemen's civil war (2015-)", *International Politics* 60, no. 1 (2023): 134-153; Janis Grzybowski, "Separatists, state subjectivity, and fundamental ontological (in) security in international relations". *International Relations* 36, no. 3 (2022): 504-522; Daniela Huber and Eckart Woertz. "Resilience, conflict and areas of limited statehood in Iraq, Lebanon and Syria." Democratization 28, no. 7 (2021): 1261-1279.

27 Hinnebusch, "Change and Continuity", and Hinnebusch, "The trajectories of the MENA republics", *Routledge Handbook of Middle East Politics* (Routledge, 2020); Roger Owen, *State, Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East*, 3rd ed (London/New York: Routledge, 1992); Laura Guazzone, and Daniela Pioppi, *The Arab State and Neo-Liberal Globalization: The Restructuring of State Power in the Middle East* (Ithaca, 2009); Giacomo Luciani, *The Arab State* (University of California Press, 1990); Nazih Ayubi, *Over-Stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East* (I.B. Tauris, 1996).

28 Francesco Cavatorta, "Historical/Geopolitical Turning Points in the Modern Mediterranean", in *Routledge Handbook of Mediterranean Politics* (Routledge Handbooks Online, 2017).

29 United Nations Development Program (UNDP), *Arab Human Development Report 2016: Youth and Prospects for Human Development in a*

and has since continued to fuel conflict and insecurity across the region while diminishing internal social cohesion and trust in governing institutions, remains a major challenge for the region, particularly in crisis-affected countries (Libya, Syria, Yemen).[30] Transparency Inter-national notes that many states "have been built on corrupt systems that empower the few and employ Wasta (favouritism) and bribes, stratifying societies and building up grievances that lead to conflicts and bloodshed" and that "lack of transparency in state security budgets allows funds to be spent without public input [...and] redirected by corrupt actors."[31]

On Transparency International's Government Defence Anti-Corruption Index in 2022, "no country ranked better than "high" risk, with most ranking as "very high."[32] Meanwhile, the Fragile State Index, which measures a range of state cohesion, economic, political, and social/cross-cutting indicators, featured 14 countries in 2023 from the region: two countries are marked "high alert" (Syria, Yemen) and three are marked "alert" (Iraq, Lebanon, Libya), while three are classified as "high warning" (Egypt, Iran, the occupied Palestinian territories), one as "elevated warning" (Jordan), and four as "warning" (Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Algeria).[33]

Compounding chronically ineffective governance and fuelling a generalised, long-term crisis of legitimacy that further undermines state authority in much of the region, MENA governments have also been supported and instrumentalised by **powerful international actors with geopolitical and geostrategic regional interests** that have repeatedly intervened in different ways over many years directly and indirectly via regional state and non-state actors. This geostrategic region holds approximately 60% of global oil reserves and 45% of natural gas reserves.[34] The high importance of the Suez Canal and the strategic straits for international shipping and movement is one aspect of international geostrategic interest, alongside other aspects such as the region's role as a major importer of conventional arms and as host to numerous foreign military bases.

While the presence and influence of the United States (US), Russia, and various European countries in the region dates back decades, China is the most recent entrant to geopolitical competition in the region, in line with its "going global" strategy and Belt and Road Initiative. For example, although Chinese investment in medium- and large-scale infrastructure projects began in 2005 (notably in Arabian Peninsula, Iran, and North African states), its engagement intensified after 2011. In 2016, China was the largest investor in the region, accounting for around a third of foreign direct investments, much directed towards infrastructure construction (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt)[35]. Chinese investment in the region goes

Changing Reality (New York: 2016), https://hdr.undp.org/content/arab-human-development-report-2016-youth-and-prospects-human-development-changing-reality; UNDP, *Arab Human Development Report 2022*: Expanding Opportunities for an Inclusive and Resilient Recovery in the Post-Covid Era (New York: 2022), https://www.undp.org/arab-states/publications/arab-human-development-report-2022-expanding-opportunities-inclusive-and-resilient-recovery-post-covid-era; Bahgat Korany, ed., *Arab Human Development in the Twenty-First Century* (Cairo, Egypt: American University in Cairo Press, 2014).

30   Transparency International, "CPI 2022".

31   Ibid.

32   Ibid.

33   The Fund for Peace, "Fragile States Index", online database, 2023, https://fragilestatesindex.org/.

34   World Population Review, "MENA Countries 2023", online database, https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/mena-countries.

35   Chuchu Zhang, "China's Infrastructure Construction in the Middle East", in *Routledge Companion to China and the Middle East and North Africa Edition* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2023), 48; Lisa Watanabe, "China as a Geo-Economic and Security Actor in the MENA Region", in *Routledge Companion to China and the Middle East and North Africa* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2023), 1810; Nurettin Akcay, "Beyond Oil:

well beyond infrastructure to include investments in technology, renewable and nuclear energy, arms, logistics, communications, and private sector trade. From 2005-2021, total investments by China in the region were estimated to be $213.9 billion; in Saudi Arabia alone, it was $43.47 billion across the same period.[36]

While recognising important sub-regional differences and noting oil-producing economy and Arabian Peninsula[37] exceptions in some areas, the overall MENA regional situation today can be generally described as **having deteriorated** over the last two-to-three years, owing to the socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19[38] pandemic (2021), the geopolitical and regional implications of the Russian war in Ukraine (2022), and a series of natural disasters, such as the major earthquakes that hit Türkiye/Syria (February 2023) and Morocco (September 2023).[39] The frequency and severity of natural disasters are also exacerbated by the effects of climate change, namely higher temperatures (e.g., wildfires in Algeria in 2023 and in Algeria, Lebanon, Morocco, and Tunisia in 2022) and extreme weather events such as Cyclone Daniel, which caused severe flooding and killed thousands of people in Libya in September 2023. Some 2022 climate projections imply that temperatures may be rising so rapidly that region is "warming up twice as fast as the rest of the world."[40]

The political, economic, and security implications of climate change in a highly water-stressed region with limited and inequitably distributed natural resources and a lack of food security, are serious. Alongside rising tem-peratures, projections forecast extended droughts (e.g., the long-term severe drought ongoing Syria and Iraq for years)[41], increased food insecurity, greater rural-to-urban migration, and rising sea levels—all of which will directly impact the lives and livelihoods of regional populations (particularly the most vulnerable), hurt economic devel-opment, and increase political tensions and social unrest. Driven by low supply and rising demand from domestic, agricultural, and industrial uses, the region is the most water-stressed in the world. Approximately 83% of the region's population and 9 out of 10 children[42] are exposed to high or extremely high water stress, with the most water-stressed countries in the region being Bahrain, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, and Qatar.[43] At least 41 million people across the region lack access to basic drinking water services and 66 million to basic sanitation

A new phase in China Middle East Engagement", *Diplomat*, January 25, 2023, https://thediplomat.com/2023/01/beyond-oil-a-new-phase-in-china-middle-east-engagement/.

36   Akcay, "Beyond Oil".

37   Adam Hanieh, *Money, markets, and monarchies: The Gulf Cooperation Council and the political economy of the contemporary Middle East Vol. 4* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

38   Adam Hanieh and Rafeef Ziadah, "Pandemic Effects: COVID-19 and the Crisis of Development in the Middle East", *Development and Change* 53, no. 6 (2022): 1308-1334.

39   Anna Mahjar-Barducci, "Aid, Politics, and the Deadly Earthquake in Morocco", Australian Institute of International Affairs, September 21, 2023, https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/aid-politics-and-the-deadly-earthquake-in-morocco/; Africa News, "Algeria: Bejaïa forest burns again as several wildfires break out", September 16, 2023, https://www.africanews.com/2023/09/16/algeria-bejaia-forest-burns-again-as-several-wildfires-break-out/; Agence France-Presse (AFP), "Lebanon pine forest blaze begins wildfire season", June 2, 2022, https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/06/lebanon-pine-forest-blaze-begins-wildfire-season; Rim Taher, "Libya orders 8 officials arrested after flood disaster", AFP, September 25, 2022, https://news.yahoo.com/libya-orders-8-officials-arrested-112902510.html.

40   Anthony Cordesman, "The Changing Strategic Importance of the Middle East and North Africa, Volume Two: The Impact of Growing Military and Civil Instability in the MENA Region", Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 24, 2023, 134, https://www.csis.org/analysis/changing-strategic-importance-middle-east-and-north-africa.

41   Sharmila Devi, "Iraq and Syria Facing Extreme Drought,: *The Lancet*, vol. 398 (Oct 2021), 1395, https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(21)02238-8/fulltext. Some analysts have argued that the Syrian uprising and civil war was also shaped by persistent drought and resulting deprivation.

42   United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), *Running Dry: The impact of water scarcity on children in the Middle East and North Africa* (New York: 2021), https://www.unicef.org/mena/media/12871/file/RunningDry-WASH-FullReport.pdf%20.pdf.

43   Samantha Kuzma et al., "25 Countries in the world face, housing one-quarter of the population, extremely high water stress", World Resources Institute, August 16, 2023, https://www.wri.org/insights/highest-water-stressed-countries.

services, excluding countries and areas affected by conflict where the situation is far worse.[44] An estimated 75% of agriculture depends on rainfall levels, which are also likely to decrease in the future.[45] Declining water supply is one critical aspect of future environmental challenges, as is the challenge of promoting inter-regional cooperation and projects to tackle poor water management and treatment to ensure sanitary use and safe water disposal.

Expanding electricity-generating capacity across the region in the coming years through a shift away from fossil fuels and towards renewable energy is yet another critical challenge.[46] The importance of preventing the use of natural resources, notably food and water, in conflict contexts as a weapon wielded by regional conflict parties (and non-state proxies) against targeted civilian population in violation of international humanitarian law (e.g., Syria, occupied Palestinian territories) is a final challenge to consider. To sum up, the effects of **climate change** have the potential to act as a **multidimensional threat and conflict multiplier** in the MENA region, fuelling existing conflicts and creating new ones while simultaneously shaping migration and adding to the region's already-high number of refugees and IDPs.

Since the Strategy was adopted, progress towards sustainable development, environmental protection, and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has been minimal and certain socioeconomic, demographic, and labour market trends remain of concern (although national variation is again significant and the oil-rich Arabian Peninsula countries are exceptions). Gender equality remains a challenge and the rate of female participation in the labour force also remains low across the region (20% in North Africa, 13.2% in the Near East, and 35.8% in the Arabian Peninsula excluding Iran).[47]

Estimated to be nearly 30%, the youth unemployment rate in the region is the highest in the world[48] and poses one of the most significant challenges in light of the region's **high population growth rate** and rapid urbanisation. Estimated at approximately 468 million people in 2023 (33% ages 0-14, 19% ages 10-19, 28% ages 10-24, 63% ages 15-64, and 5% over 65), the population of the Arab States is projected to double in 38 years-much faster than Europe and Central Asia's population is projected to double (in 64 years), for example, or the population in the Asia and Pacific region (104 years)—while Iran's population is 89.2 million, projected to double in 94 years.[49] A "second demographic wave" across the region is expected to peak in ~2035 and is already exerting pressure on education systems and employment in those countries most affected (e.g., Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, the occupied Palestinian territories, and Yemen).[50]

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44 UNICEF, *Running Dry*, 9.

45 Anthony Cordesman, "The Changing Strategic Importance of the Middle East and North Africa, Volume One: The Strengths and Limits of Oil and Gas Wealth and the Challenge of Climate Change and Great Power Competition", Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 24, 2023, 136, https://www.csis.org/analysis/changing-strategic-importance-middle-east-and-north-africa-0.

46 Cordesman, "Changing Strategic Importance – Volume 1", 122.

47 International Labour Organization, *World Employment and Social Outlook: Global Trends 2023* (Geneva: 2023), 150-160.

48 Ibid.

49 United Nations Population Fund, "World Population Dashboard", online database, accessed 2 October 2023: https://www.unfpa.org/data/world-population-dashboard.

50 Nader S. Kabbani, *The Middle East Faces Major Development Challenges: Most Countries Are Not Prepared To Meet Them*, Middle East Council on Global Affairs, Issue Brief, July 2022, https://mecouncil.org/publication/the-middle-east-faces-major-development-challenges-most-countries-are-not-prepared-to-meet-them-2/.

Although slower than in previous years, **rapid urbanisation** continues across the region: an estimated "275 million people—64 percent of the population—live in urban areas; by 2050, that number is projected to reach 486 million, or 74 percent of the population [...] Much of the urban growth in absolute terms will occur in the region's primary urban centers, although faster growth in relative terms will occur in the region's secondary centers."[51] A range of potential infrastructural and socioeconomic pressures related to urbanisation pose their own set of challenges in the future, in light of the growing population. Creating new job opportunities to absorb future young entrants to the labour market alone is a massive challenge for developing states in the region; action must be taken to make the best possible use of the demographic 'youth bulge' for the advancement of young people across the region.[52] Continuing to heavily rely on the oil-producing states, particularly in the Arabian Peninsula, to relieve labour supply pressures and provide remittances for the rest of the region in the future may be risky, as this strategy depends on the success of those states in diversifying their own economics today.[53]

The region is also one of the worst in the world regarding **inequality** and wealth distribution,[54] both within countries and between countries (and sub-regions). The World Inequality Report 2022 noted that the share in earnings of the bottom 50% of the population in the region was less than 15%[55] on average, while the share of the top 10% reached up to 58% in some countries.[56] Inequality between countries remains high in 2022, with seven countries classified as high income (Bahrain, Israel, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE), three as upper middle income (Iraq, Libya, West Bank and Gaza), seven as lower middle income (Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia), and two as low income (Syria, Yemen).[57]

In middle-income Arab countries, nearly one in four individuals remain affected by multidimensional household poverty, with rural residents experiencing the highest deprivation levels.[58] In 2022, the region recorded high levels of inflation (especially in countries that also experienced currency depreciation) and skyrocketing food prices owing to the combined effects of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine.[59] Food price inflation had a direct impact on levels of food insecurity around the region, which affected "poorer households the most."[60] **Social protection** systems remain weak and "coverage and spending through national social protection systems are very limited in conflict-affected and fragile countries...where fewer than 20% of the population are effectively covered;"[61] this results in lack of social

51   Alex Baeumler et al., *Demographic Trends and Urbanization* (Washington D.C.: World Bank, 2020): 121-12.

52   Baeumler et al., *Demographic Trends*.

53   Kabbani, *The Middle East Faces*.

54   Cordesman, "Changing Strategic Importance – Volume 2", 71.

55   World Inequality Database, *World Inequality Report 2022*, 3, https://wir2022.wid.world/www-site/uploads/2023/03/D_FINAL_WIL_RIM_RAPPORT_2303.pdf.

56   Ibid., 11.

57   World Bank, "The World by Income and Region", online database, accessed October 2023, https://datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators/the-world-by-income-and-region.html.

58   UNDP, *Second Arab Multidimension Poverty Report* (New York: 2023), 9, https://www.undp.org/arab-states/publications/second-arab-multidimensional-poverty-report.

59   World Bank, "Growth Slows for Most MENA Economies Amid Double-Digit Food Inflation", press release, April 6, 2023, https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2023/04/06/growth-slows-for-most-mena-economies-amid-double-digit-food-inflation.

60   Ibid.

61   International Labour Organization (ILO), *World Social Protection Report, 2020-2022: Regional Companion Report for the MENA Region* (Geneva: 2022), https://www.ilo.org/beirut/publications/WCMS_830406/lang--en/index.htm.

protection for the most vulnerable segments of society, particularly for older persons in the region that must rely on their families and communities for care in their senior years, the burden of which falls disproportionately on women.[62] Though the region today remains relatively youthful, in the coming years the number of older persons is projected to increase and elderly care is expected to pose an increasing challenge.[63]

Meanwhile, regional investment in **healthcare** remains very low (less than 5% of gross domestic product in some states), and basic health care provision is often weak or lacking in low- and middle-income countries. In contrast, high-income countries in the Arabian Peninsula invest significantly in healthcare, with expenditures rising from $76.1 billion in 2017 to around $104.6 billion in 2022 (6.6% compound annual growth rate).[64] This foreshadows a future challenge for the region in light of the wide range of different health problems afflicting populations around the region depending on their domestic circum-stances (national income level). In the high-income Arabian Peninsula states, non-communicable diseases are the leading cause of death and disability today, and are projected to continued posing a serious challenge for populations as life expectancies keep increasing, notably cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes, and respiratory diseases. In 2019, non-communi-cable diseases were already estimated to have directly cost these economies $16.7 billion and indirectly cost them around $80 billion in lost worker productivity.[65]

In low- and middle-income MENA countries, there is an **urgent need for new social contracts** to be forged,[66] and for weak social cohesion and faltering trust in governing authorities and state institutions to be renewed through the improved provision of basic services. However, doubts persist about the political will, institutional capacity, and material resources of national governments and local authorities to maintain the pace of change and to effectively respond to the range of complex, multidimensional challenges facing the region—or to effectively provide essential public services, infra-structure, and credible opportunities for education, vocational training, and decent work, in particular to young people, women and girls, marginalised minority groups, and vulnerable populations, such as refugees and IDPs. Failure to concretely move in this direction will potentially result in repeated and intensifying humanitarian crises, out-migration, and further exacerbation of regional and local conflict dynamics, coupled with the likely political response of greater repression.

At the same time, governments in high-income, oil-producing MENA states have begun a long-term process of transforming their economies through greater diversification and foreign investment (e.g., tourism, scientific research). Specifically in the Arabian Peninsula states, investments in economic and human development continued to accelerate, which also indirectly benefits for non-oil producing countries in the region (via employment opportunities and remittances,

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

64 Hamade, Mohamed Ali, "How can healthcare and education in the Gulf keep pace with a fast-changing world?" Davos Agenda 2022, 20 January 2022, https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/01/healthcare-reforms-are-gathering-pace-in-the-gulf/.

65 World Bank, *Gulf Economic Update: The Health and Economic Burden of Non-Communicable Diseases in the GCC* (Washington D.C.: 2022), https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099540005112341051/pdf/IDU0dfad6e2f0791104fa80824b05cb6e69490c2.pdf.

66 Steven Heydemann, "Rethinking social contracts in the MENA region: Economic governance, contingent citizenship, and state-society relations after the Arab uprisings", *World Development* 135 (2020): 105019.

investments, direct assistance).[67] Despite the short-term effects of the Russian war in Ukraine on global oil prices, long-term projections indicate declining prices owing to shifts away from fossil fuels and towards **renewable energy**, where the region has significant potential as a supplier (e.g., solar, wind). National oil reserves are also projected to be gradually depleted in the coming years, beginning with Bahrain and Oman.[68] In oil-producing Arabian Peninsula states and Iran, the energy transition away from fossil fuels and towards sustainable renewable energy resources (solar, wind) simultaneously represents a series of potential challenges and opportunities for those states already in the process of diversifying oil-based economies.

Economic diversification is essential in countries with historically high dependence on oil export revenues: expressed as a percentage of gross domestic product, Iraq's oil dependence is 32% and Algeria, Kuwait, Libya, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Tunisia are all over 10%.[69] In recent years, Saudi Arabia has made progress diversifying its economy. As oil revenues decline and populations continues to grow in the future, the region will face complex economic and financial challenges, particularly in countries with high levels of external debt. Ons example of dangerously high levels of external debt is Egypt, which is facing debt repayments of around $29 billion in 2024 and whose overall debt has quadrupled since 2011 and reached $165.4 billion in March (38.7% of gross domestic product), driven by increased borrowing from multilateral lenders and international debt markets.[70]

This brief overview lays out just some of the future challenges that must be addressed in order to help direct the ongoing regional transformation towards a stable, prosperous future for MENA populations. With this background in mind as a point of departure, the following thematic analysis considers selected main trends and key issues at the sub-regional level.

2.2   Peace, Security and Human Rights

Existing and potential sources of future conflict in **North Africa** include near-term, immediate threats related to the ongoing civil conflict in a divided Libya,[71] particularly tensions around the equitable distribution of natural (oil) resources; ongoing humanitarian and migration crises (Libya); worsening instability in neighbouring regions and states that continues to spill over and carries potentially serious future implications for North African stability (Sahara-Sahel, Mali, Burkina-Faso, Sudan), as well as the deepening involve-ment of international actors (United States, Russia, France), regional states (e.g., UAE in Sudan/Darfur, Libya, Chad, Mali), and private military and security companies in these areas;[72] continuation of large-scale irregular migration, forced displacement, and refugee

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67   Kabbani, *The Middle East Faces.*

68   Ibid.

69   Cordesman, "Changing Strategic Importance – Volume 1," 37.

70   The Enterprise, "Egypt faces more than USD 29 bn in debt repayments in 2024, CBE data suggest," 2 October 2023, https://enterprise. news/news/story/c4c99b98-6ac1-44ac-92fc-525f702f20e4/Nearly%20a%20fifth%20of%20our%20external%20debt%20is%20due%20next%20 year.

71   Wolfram Lacher, "Libya's Militias have become the state", SWP Commentary, July 31, 2023, https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2023C44/ paper.

72   Small Arms Survey, Security Assessment in North Africa project, https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/project/security-assessment-north-af- rica-sana.

flows, with North Africa as either a final destination or transit hub on the way to Europe; and instability caused by potential large-scale economic collapse and/or state bankruptcy (Tunisa, Egypt). Sources of medium- and long-term threat include: the possibility of deteriorating Algeria- Morocco relations (Western Sahara); the consequences and implications of arms proliferation and spread of (transnational) criminal networks and activities, such as arms trafficking, drug trafficking, and people smuggling; domestic instability and unrest caused by resurgent authoritar-ianism and repression in a worsening economic context (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya); and threats posed by terrorism and violent extremism, which have the potential to become more appealing within a context of conflict, human-itarian crises, and authoritarian resurgence.

Existing and potential sources of future conflict in the **Near East** include near-term, immediate threats related to the ongoing civil conflict in a divided Syria; domestic instability and unrest caused by resurgent authoritarianism and repression in a worsening economic context (Lebanon, Iraq, Syria); the potential consequences of arms proliferation and spread of (transnational) criminal networks and activities, such as arms trafficking, drug trafficking, and people smuggling; and instability caused by large-scale economic collapse and/or state bankruptcy (Lebanon, Syria). Medium- and long-term threats relate to the ongoing Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories and continued violence, exclusion, and repression of the Palestinian population in violation of international law;[73] the risk of insta-bility that would result if donor countries decided to close UNRWA-run refugee camps in the region[74] and/or the terminate UNRWA-provided educational and employment pro-grammes for Palestinian refugees;[75] the risk of new conflicts over natural resources (Eastern Mediterranean gas field[76]); and the potential for renewed conflict in Iraq, despite ongoing efforts to prevent the resurgence of extremist groups, for a wide range of possible reasons related to structural violence, exclusion, and inequality.

Existing and potential sources of future conflict in the **Arabian Peninsula and Iran** include near-term, immediate threats related to the potential for any heightened tensions or pressure on Iran, or indeed any future escalations including an attack on Iran (Israel, the United States); worsening of instability and humanitarian crisis in Yemen[77] and potential sub-regional effects; the increasing geopolitical and economic involvement of sub-regional states in neighbouring areas, including but not limited to Sudan, Libya, and the Horn of Africa, may also create potential for future conflict; the implications of ongoing arms proliferation and spread of transnational arms/drug trafficking and people smuggling networks in the Near East and North Africa; and domestic instability and unrest caused by resurgent authoritarianism and repression (Iran, Saudi Arabia). Medium and long-term threats

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73   See all chapters in: Riccardo Bocco and Fritz Froehlich, with Farrah Hawana (eds), *UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees: Challenges for Developing a Strategic Vision* (Geneva: Graduate Institute of International Studies, 2022).

74   Riccardo Bocco, "UNRWA and the Palestinian refugees: a history within history", *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 28, no. 2-3 (2009): 229-252.

75   International Crisis Group, "UNRWA's Reckoning: Preserving the UN agency serving Palestinian refugees", Middle East and Africa Report no. 242, September 15, 2023, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/east-mediterranean-mena/israelpalestine/242-un-rwas-reckoning-preserving-un-agency-serving-palestinian-refugees.

76   International Crisis Group, "Rethinking Gas Diplomacy in the Eastern Mediterranean", Middle East and Africa Report no. 240, April 20, 2023, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/east-mediterranean-mena-turkiye/240-rethinking-gas-diplomacy-eastern.

77   Nadwa al-Dawsari, "A Three-Part Formula to Persuade Armed Groups in Yemen to Respect Human Rights". The Century Foundation (TCF), May 15, 2023, https://tcf.org/content/report/a-three-part-formula-to-persuade-armed-groups-in-yemen-to-respect-human-rights/, and Nadwa al-Dawsari, "No Government Controls Yemen's Armed Groups: Policymakers can still push them to respect rights", TCF, May 25, 2023, https://tcf.org/content/commentary/no-government-controls-yemens-armed-groups-policymakers-can-still-push-them-to-respect-rights/.

include the potential reversal of recent de-escalation initiatives between the Arabian Peninsula states and Iran, revived or new rivalries between the Arabian Peninsula states (Qatar versus Saudi Arabia et al.), and heightened tensions or closure of the strategically-important Bab-al-Mandeb and Hormuz straits controlled by Iran, which are vital to shipping lanes and international trade and where attacks on cargo vessels already occur, as do occasional joint military exercises by regional powers and their international allies.

2.3 Migration and Protecting People in Need

For Switzerland, and for Europe as a whole, managing migration flows and protecting people in need is of particular concern in the neighbouring sub-regions of North Africa and the Near East. At least three[78] existing and future migration and protection challenges in **North Africa** can be highlighted. First, the ongoing conflict in Sudan since April 2023 is generating new influx of refugees into neighbouring countries (est. 738,000 from April to July 2023)—notably to Egypt, where estimates place the number to be over 280,000, further straining the country's limited resources and infrastructure.[79] Second, refugees, asylum seekers and migrants in Tunisia are being relocated from urban centres, stranding hundreds in remote areas and dire conditions and pushing others to Libya and Algeria.[80] Third, the protracted humanitarian and migrant crisis in Libya continues and has worsened owing to the effects of Cyclone Daniel, which killed thousands and is expected to deepen political deadlock in the country and worsen democratic indicators, as eventual reconstruction aid will provide new opportunities for elite corruption and signs point to continued reliance of repressive tactics to control social unrest and opposition.[81]

Migration and protection challenges in the **Near East** in the near-term include those relating to the protracted refugee and humanitarian crises in Syria and Yemen. The situation in Syria has worsened due to the 2023 earthquake: 15.3 million Syrians, including 6.8 million IDPs, require urgent humanitarian assistance and protection inside Syria, in addition to over 1.8 million Syrian refugees in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon. Already marginalised refugees and asylum-seekers who do not have the right to work in host countries will face greater challenges.[82] The protection space in Yemen continues to shrink, with international humanitarian and human rights law violations particularly affecting the forcibly displaced; two-thirds of the Yemeni population (or, 21.6 million people) are dependent on humanitarian assistance to survive, including 4.5million IDPs and 71,000 refugees and asylum-seekers. Women and children represent 74% of the displaced population and face specific risks related to prevailing norms and customs (e.g., gender-based violence, child labour); overall, the protection risks for refugees, asylum-seekers, IDPs, and IDP returnees are being exacerbated by insecurity, economic collapse, and lack of basic services.[83]

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78   Declining healthcare access for refugees and asylum-seekers in Algeria (Sahrawi camps in Tindouf) is another challenge that must be addressed to protect these vulnerable groups and avoid future tensions.

79   UNHCR, "Critical Funding Needs in the Middle East and North Africa", September 4, 2023, https://reporting.unhcr.org/mena-critical-funding-needs-2023.

80   Ibid.

81   Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), "What's next for Libya and Morocco?", September 29, 2023, https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/libya-and-morocco-whats-next-145647.

82   UNHCR, "Critical Funding Needs".

83   Ibid.

In the medium- and long-term, there are two main migration and protection challenges with potentially serious implications. The first relates to socioeconomic challenges in neighbouring host countries, such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, creates a difficult situation and increases protection risks for Syrian (and other) refugees seeking safety in those country, while also negatively affecting the public opinion of host societies towards refugees. For example, in Lebanon 90% of Syrian refugees are living in extreme poverty as food prices have surged by 332% since June 2021, while in Jordan two-thirds of refugees reported that their financial situation had worsened in the last year. In Iraq, relative stability creates an opportunity for an estimated 1.15 million internally displaced Iraqis,[84] returnees, and refugees to be better included in public services and social protection schemes, although the country remains affected by limited national institutional capacity and susceptibility to future internal/external shocks.[85]

The second challenge relates to justice and redress for the "largest and most protracted population of externally displaced refugees," the Palestinian refugees. Keeping in mind certain data limitations and data collection complexities,[86] there were estimated to be around 14 million Palestinians worldwide as of 2021, of which approximately 9.17 are considered forcibly displaced.[87] Of these, around 1 million are believed to have been displaced in 1948 and another million displaced in 1967,[88] remaining unregistered with UNRWA. Of the estimated 5.8 million refugees registered with UNRWA in the region, in 2021 26.2% were located in the Gaza Strip, 38.3% in Jordan, 8.5% in Lebanon, 10.2% in Syria, and 16.9% in the West Bank.[89] In late 2018, it was estimated that 28% of UNRWA-registered refugees were living in one of 58 UNRWA camps in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. The remaining 70% of registered refugees "live in host communities, often in areas adjacent to camps or in one the six unofficial camps in Syria and Jordan."[90] More recently, in 2022, it was estimated that there were approximately 883,950 registered refugees among approximately 3.2 million inhabitants of the West Bank and over 1.5 million registered refugees out of approximately 2.1 million inhabitants of the Gaza Strip. In Jordan, some 2.3 million registered Palestinian refugees were estimated in 2022. As of 2021 in Lebanon, there were some 482,600 registered Palestinian refugees. As of 2020, the registered Palestinian refugee population in Syria was around 440,000, of which an estimated 60% had been again displaced at least once during the Syrian civil war.[91] Alongside the need to find sustainable and just solutions for all Palestinian refugees, the future funding of UNRWA also remains a challenge, after a decade of chronic underfunding has already negatively impacted UNRWA services (e.g., education and training systems, health care) to Palestinians living in the occupied Palestinian territories, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria.[92] Similar to

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84   UNHCR, "Middle East and North Africa" webpage, https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/regions/middle-east-and-north-africa.

85   UNHCR, "Critical Funding Needs".

86   Difficulties with data collection and classification differences may lead to different estimates. Achilli and Hanafi estimated 8 million, while Albanese and Imseis estimated 7 million. Albanese and Imseis also estimated UNRWA-registered refugees at closer to 5.7 million. See: Albanese and Imseis, "The UN Mandate Toward the Palestinian Refugees," in Bocco and Froehlich, with Hawana (eds), *UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees*.

87   BADIL Resource Center, *Survey of Palestinian Refugees*, xvii.

88   Albanese and Imseis, "The UN Mandate," in Bocco and Froehlich, with Hawana (eds), *UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees*, 22.

89   BADIL Resource Center, *Survey of Palestinian Refugees*, xvii.

90   Achilli and Hanafi, "Migration Trends of Palestinian Refugees Registered with UNRWA", in Bocco and Froehlich, with Hawana (eds), *UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees*, 144-147.

91   Ibid.

92   UNRWA, "Pledges At Funding Conference Not Sufficient To Cover UNRWA Financial Requirements From September Onwards", press

other major multilateral organisations that make up the UN system, UNRWA is also in need of significant political and institutional reform.

2.4   Sustainable Development and Climate Change

Existing and future sustainable development and environmental challenges in **North Africa** include:

- Demographic challenges related to high population growth rates combined with over-burdened education and vocational training systems and high levels of chronic youth unemployment (25.3% in North Africa)[93] and insecure employment in the informal economy;

- Overstretched educational and vocational training systems and providing inclusive access to quality education for all remains a challenge

- Rapid urbanisation and projected increased rural-to-urban migration present a range of infrastructural, socioeconomic, and political challenges;

- Investing in social protection and health systems that provide adequate coverage and are able to respond to external shocks;

- Responding to the implications of climate change, including increased sea levels, decreased fresh water resources, poorer crop yields and greater food insecurity, and creeping desertification, which some estimate will create up to 20 million internal climate migrants in North Africa alone[94] by 2050, and ensuring climate justice;

- Investing in sustainable sources of renewable energy (solar, wind) and investing in environmentally-friendly public infrastructure; and

- Taking advantage of digital opportunities to improve government responsiveness to the needs of populations, even in the event of external shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., digitising social protection services).

Four major sustainable development and environmental challenges in **the Near East** include those relating to demographic projections of high population growth rates combined with over-burdened education and vocational training systems and high levels of chronic youth unemployment (29.7% in the Near East)[95] and informality; the possible spread of water-borne diseases and other emergent health risks related to protracted humanitarian and migration crisis in Syria, where cholera[96] has recently reappeared; rapid urbanisation and projected increased rural-to-urban migration, which presents a range of infrastructural, socioeconomic, and political challenges; and overstretched educational and vocational training systems, which makes providing inclusive access to quality education for all a challenge.

Two major sustainable development and environmental challenges in **the Arabian**

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release, June 2, 2023, https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/news-releases/pledges-funding-conference-not-sufficient-cover-unrwa-financial-requirements.

93   International Labour Organization, *World Employment and Social Outlook*, 150-160.

94   Cordesman, "Changing Strategic Importance – Volume 1", 136.

95   International Labour Organization, *World Employment and Social Outlook*, 150-160.

96   Aron Lund, "Cholera in the Time of Assad: How Syria's Water Crisis Caused an Avoidable Outbreak", TCF, January 24, 2023, https://tcf.org/content/report/cholera-in-the-time-of-assad-how-syrias-water-crisis-caused-an-avoidable-outbreak/.

Peninsula and Iran include rapid urbanisation presents a range of infrastructural, socioeconomic, and political challenges; and responding to the implications of climate change, including increased sea levels, decreased fresh water resources, poorer crop yields, greater food insecurity, and creeping desertification, as well as responding to its regional implications as a threat multiplier and destabilising force while ensuring climate justice for local communities.

3. Expert Insights

This chapter summarizes the outcomes of the discussions held during the expert workshop on 5 and 6 October organised by GCSP in collaboration with the CCDP. Building upon the thematic analysis, high-level international and Swiss experts on the MENA region engaged in further exchange and analysis of the region. The list of contributors is available at the beginning of this study.

3.1 Peace, Security and Human Rights; Migration and Protecting People in Need

- Debate occurred around the questions of "what is security" (security for whom?) and "what is peace," as well as "what peace might look like" from the perspective of different regional populations, especially those living in marginalised and excluded area (e.g., rural communities referred to by experts in the shorthand as "flyover country" or those excluded and marginalised communities that are neglected and get insufficient attention, investment, or resources). Experts agreed that there is a need to **consult local inhabitants about how they see peace and what that means to them in a concrete sense**. It was unanimously understood and highlighted that "peace" and "stability" are not synonyms, and that the ongoing authoritarian resurgence or "backsliding" across the region may present an impression of "stability" but that this conceals and is belied by serious structural governance problems in all countries across the region. Due to a lack of strategic vision or objectives on the part of regional/international governments and international organisations, one expert described the status quo in the region as a "peace by default...because there is nothing to be achieved through war [except] refinement and sophistication of plundering strategies by ruling elites (state capture, money laundering, etc.) who emerge through success or victory in conflicts...but there is nothing to be gained on the battlefield." This opinion was supported by the example of Yemen, where no one can win. Another expert noted that "we don't know what a peaceful order looks like for the region today [because while] less violence is good there is no *positive peace.*"

- Rich discussions about **"peace" vs. "stability"** in the region generated shared agreement that ongoing "normalisation efforts" in the region show the limits of appeasing repressive regimes (that are themselves sources of instability) in exchange for greater political/economic opportunities, since regimes in question (Syria, Israel) have not changed their behaviour at all and continue to act with impunity. Near unanimous agreement that these **short-sighted and unsustainable "normalisation efforts" will bring neither peace nor stability** to the region, regardless of how either might be defined, because they ignore the historical context and root causes of conflict, inequality, and violence in the region. Western governments hoping to advance their interests through closer relations with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, for example, are creating a certain "fear of missing out" (FOMO) pressures that are perceived to be motivating some of this

diplomatic movement towards normalisation, particularly in Europe. Although the GCC countries were described by some as "yearning to be involved and taken seriously" as international players, experts rightly wondered what these players intend to contribute to global norms and international law.

- During the workshop, the consensus opinion was that **moral and political inconsistencies and double standards** on the part of the US and many European states claiming to uphold international law and a "rules-based international order" generally serves to further under-mine the credibility of the "West" in the eyes of regional populations (rather than in the eyes of elite-led governments, which depend on external support to maintain regime power through repression). The complicity of Western states and private companies in supporting repressive MENA regimes, particularly in the area of arms sales and sales of weapons to governments likely to use them against civilian populations, was highlighted repeatedly as a source of future threat and vulnerability. The **direct and indirect role of external actors** in supporting regime repression of regional societies and populations—and local perceptions of this role as shaped by all forms of media—was described by experts as continuing to destabilise domestic politics in many countries, posing an immediate, medium-term, and long-term threat to the entire region.

- It was further observed and generally agreed by all participants that powerful and influential foreign countries (pursuing their own geopolitical interests) have been intervening in the MENA region for many years with **"no clear strategy"** and insufficient **"understanding of the region and its inhabitants."** In particular, Western understandings of and policymaking towards the region were described as "confused" or "misguided" and as resting on reductive assumptions, race- or religion-based stereotypes, and other caricatures. Consistent refusal to **try to understand the region on its own terms** by genuinely exploring the nuanced complexity of heterogenous regional societies and histories—rather than as a monolithic or homogenous abstract "threat," or as sterile empty terrain upon which to advance Western interests and enact Western policies, with no inherent value aside from whatever can be extracted from the region by rapacious external actors—was described as an important driver of various negative regional trends that have only been accelerated by the disastrous Global War on Terror (GWoT) (e.g., militarisation/securitisation of policymaking in the region; ignoring the hard work of tackling root causes of conflict and building lasting peace through collaborative inclusive frameworks in favour of continuing to support repressive regimes that can only maintain an illusory, unsustainable image of "stability"). Significant doubt was expressed at various points regarding whether any meaningful lessons were learned from the counterproductive and destructive GwoT experiences in the region. Many agreed that the Western governments and policymakers appear to remain unprepared and ill-equipped to understand the MENA region or its inhabitants, and that this lack of understanding among international policymakers poses increasing risks in the context of **renewed geopolitical rivalries and a shifting international environment**.

- Debate also focused on the question of what might replace the "void" being left by the perceived **ongoing US retreat** from the region, with some experts opining that nothing will emerge to fill this gap. Others pointed to recent regional rapprochement efforts and renewed geopolitical competition to

illustrate the opinion that "the region is at greater liberty now to define its own future than ever before" and that, especially in the GCC countries, regional states today show waning interest in seeking external guidance from the "West" in general—preferring instead to either "solve their problems on their own" or to look elsewhere (e.g., Russia, China, etc.). The **"convening power"** of the Western countries in conflict resolution or peace facilitation, including traditionally neutral countries like Switzerland with its good offices role, was thought by some to be weakening in general around the world. There was some debate about whether this weakening indicated an irreversible decline, or whether strategic reorientation/new policy measures might still be taken soon to maintain medium-/long-term relevance, even as other international actors/geopolitical rivals continue to involve themselves in the region and attempt to offer alternative global leadership models. Despite some debate about the scope, extent, and future of "Western decline" and its effect on policymaking towards the region, it was nonetheless unanimously agreed that **no less than a paradigm shift in thinking is needed** among Western policymakers, especially in light of a larger global transition to a more 'multipolar' future.

- The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, especially the questions of **gender inequalities and gender-based violence** (GBV) remain crucial areas of focus in the region. Regarding the situation of refugees, women and girls are especially affected; in refugee camps and elsewhere, the need remains for safe places for women/girls, vocational training, women in community leadership, and further empowerment and capacity-building.

- Western tendencies to view everything through **a single monothematic lens (security) in the region**—which is encouraged and reproduced also be repressive elite-led governments—were repeatedly raised as an example of the kind of **counter-productive and short-term thinking** that will never bring either peace or stability to the region in the long term. The **securitisation** of development discourse and agendas, and especially securitisation of migration and refugees, were unanimously described as a major obstacle to the future of the entire region and its individual countries. Moreover, this single analytical lens ignores the larger bigger; for example, **migration in the region is a multifaceted and complex series of transnational processes that cannot be reduced to simply the issue of refugees**. By ignoring everything else, security-obsessed analysis either overlooks or entirely misses other critical factors related to migration (such as food security, economic opportunities, etc.) and its numerous long-term effects on the region (e.g., rural-urban migration, brain drain, talent exodus, the situation of those "left behind" as migration accelerates, etc.).

- Experts raised critical questions about **when a "humanitarian crisis" (such as a refugee crisis) lasts for so long that it can no longer be considered a "crisis" but rather just the new normal**? When and how to shift from "crisis response" short-term assistance and ad hoc interventions to more coherent, holistic development programming that should take place in a medium- and long-term time frame?

- In migration, the major refugee crises to focus on were most often said to be those involving Syrian, Yemeni, and Palestinian refugees. Unanimous

agreement that there meaningful, credible solutions need to be found for all refugees in the region to be able to live dignified lives with decent work and opportunities. It was suggested that there is a need to recognise that **"generational shifts"** are occurring in refugee camps around the region, not just in the case of Palestine (one of the longest protracted refugee crises), but also in Syrian refugee camps. It was pointed out that many children born in those refugee camps are now growing up with no memory of Syria before the war and, as a result, have no particular desire to return: "they don't want to move back, they want to move on." To this end, the **need for vocational training and education for refugee populations**, to give them hope for viable economic futures, was emphasised.

- Host countries in the region do not have sufficient state resources to protect or care for the large number of refugees, exacerbating tensions in the context of generalised economic crisis and growing inequality. The **tense and vulnerable situation of refugees in various host countries**, notably Syria, Lebanon, and Turkey, but also Tunisia and Libya (as well as Iran, where local hostility continues against Afghan refugees), was repeatedly flagged by experts as of major concern. The potential for future destabilisation resulting from politicisation and instrumentalisation of refugee communities in the domestic politics of host countries remains high, with possible regional implications.

- Drivers of migration are manifold and complex, and should also include consideration of **mental health**. Some experts observed that there is a generalised mental health crisis among region's youth, which is not aided by the spread of drugs such as Captagon, and that years of life under repressive governments coupled with an absence of credible hope for the future fosters a deep sense of despair, convincing many that irregular migration is the sole option to survive. Another overlooked area of focus concerns issues around **"information and disinformation"** via social media and other forms of media, which also relates directly to migration drivers.

- **Rural-urban migration** and migration from peri-urban areas were highlighted as of major relevance to the future of the region; mono-thematic, short-term focus on refugees only continues to ignore more complex, medium/long-term migration trends and processes. The full picture of regional migration should be studied seriously on its own merits, if one wishes to understand contemporary dynamics shaping the MENA.

- **Justice for Palestine** and the unresolved conflict/occupation was repeatedly flagged as an urgent and pressing issue that cannot be ignored. Many different aspects/examples/implications of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip was raised by experts throughout the workshop discussion. Experts also recognised a repetitive cycle involving periodic Israeli destruction of UNRWA refugee camps, schools, and facilities during attacks on the occupied Palestinian territories, which are then rebuilt and paid for by European donors, before being eventually destroyed again by Israel at a later date and re-starting the cycle.

3.2   Sustainable Development and Climate Change; Economic Affairs, Finance, and Science

- Debate occurred around the questions of "what is sustainable development" (development for whom?) and what concepts like "human security" and "development" might mean in practice and be understood from the perspective of regional populations. As political, economic, and social **gaps between populations and their elite-led governments** in many countries the region continue to widen, differentiation was made between "policies good for ruling regimes" versus "policies good for human beings living under those regimes." Structural, region-wide challenges such as state capture by elites, inequality, structural violence, over-stretched education/vocational training systems, and a dysfunctional labour market were frequently mentioned—but no challenge was mentioned more frequently in workshop discussions than the widespread **elite corruption** (e.g., money laundering, theft of external funds, organised crime, etc.) and its pernicious effects in individual countries and across the region. This naturally was discussed in the context of chronic economic crises, high debt, and **growing risks of economic collapse** in certain countries (e.g, Tunisia, Lebanon, Egypt). Meanwhile, in the case of Libya in particular, it was observed that corruption is actively getting worse over time.

- During discussions about **regional inequalities and how to concep-tualise and understand this heterogenous region** (e.g., income-based criteria or whether countries and conflict-affected or not). A suggestion was made to conceptualise states grouped as those that are "resource-poor but labour-rich, those that are resource-rich but labour-poor, and those that are both resource-poor and labour-poor. Another suggestion was made to see the region rather as those countries engaged in "state-building" in contrast with others engaged in "state un-building" since today "these processes are unfolding together across the region. State-building is mostly being seen the GCC, for better or worse, as state-building is an inherently violent process but formulates a vision for the future upon which a government rests its legitimacy. [In contrast,] state un-building involves looking to the past, it offers nothing about the future. There is a wave of state destruction (not least through economic dynamics)" ongoing today, in a region that historically has experienced such "regional waves." However an analyst may wish to conceptualise region and groupings of regional states, it was nevertheless broadly understood by all during the workshop that the region is in flux, and in this transformation many countries are experiencing **the end of the old MENA social contract model** that had endured for many years. These dynamics will continue to shape regional politics for the foreseeable future.

- **Strong doubts were expressed by about foreign investment and large-scale macro projects** that go through state governments. It was noted that while parts of the region are "increasingly integrated into global financial networks" and markets, other (much larger) parts are being excluded. The countries that attract high investments for large projects are then also **not distributing resources or benefits among domestic populations** while also **abetting elite corruption**. Many of these large agricultural projects (or

"green energy" projects like large solar farms in North Africa) are producing for and geared towards export markets (i.e., not intended to benefit local populations). One expert noted that the GCC-inspired notion that it might be somehow possible for those urban-based ruling elites—those positioned within globalised finance and other powerful networks—who are expecting to "link up urban capitals" around the region with the aim of building new sectors, such as tourism, while also continuing to neglect and marginalise rural areas and inhabitants is at best unsustainable and at worst delusional.

- Calls to take seriously **the huge economic potential present across the region seriously on its own merits**, through consultation with munici-palities, communities, and individuals to identify existing latent potential to create new industries/sectors in the future based on local comparative advantages and resources—rather than seeing economic affairs as a regime stabilisation instrument or policy tool. State elites and regimes were widely described as deeply corrupt and showing little sign of being credible players able to develop new market sectors or bring in new labour market entrants (youth, women), especially entrepreneurs who continue to face obstacles.

- Experts widely agreed that **a broad range of legal and policy reforms** are needed to encourage investment and (youth, women's) entre-preneurship, although debates occurred about the best approach to this. Some suggested a "scaling up" approach that would begin with micro-projects or support to entrepreneurial individuals working on problem-solving projects; others noted with anecdotes that such individual/micro-level interventions are rarely scaled up in practice but rather immediately forgotten after the involved donor moves on.

- Suggestions by experts that the digital/knowledge economy could be a potential opportunity to **help improve public institutions,** which was seen as urgently needed across the region as part of strengthening **governance and rule of law**. For example, digitising public services such as banking, social assistance provision could improve their efficiency and performance by increasing state "transparency, traceability, and accountability." Young people, among which informal work and unemployment rates are very high, are a ready workforce that is open to digital/knowledge economy. Such initiatives would also improve links between the public and private sector, whereby the private sector could use its skills and knowledge to help improve the efficiency/performance of public institutions (especially central banks, social security institutions, etc.). Examples from Lebanon and Libya especially were noted.

- Frequently highlighted as major challenges in the coming years across the region were **chronic labour-skills mismatch and labour market insertion** and **insufficient and inefficient education systems and vocational training**. Experts also noted the many potential implications of the growing involvement of women in the workforce (due to migration, conflict, etc.), highlighting various complex challenges posed from states and local communities. It was also noted as particularly striking that women in certain MENA countries have relatively high levels of educational attainment although their labour force participation rate remains low. The importance of changing "mindsets and attitudes" towards women in the workplace and, indeed, towards the labour

market in general.

- Debates between experts also centred on the question of **competing "future visions" for the region**, such as the "market of tomorrow" vision encapsulated by politics and policies in GCC countries. Focus on the knowledge economy, artificial intelligence and robotics, new technologies, macro-/large-scale projects that are part of the "green transition," etc. were seen as credible only by a minority. Most experts present rejected this vision of the future as unsustainable, unrealistic, and detached from regional realities as experienced by the majority of its inhabitants. The latter group focused on inequality and exclusion, calling for a renewed focus instead on immediate concerns that could be addressed through meso-level policies focused on concrete, urgent topics, such as agricultural workers, farming practices, rural develop-ment and infrastructure, etc. These "unsexy" topics are not of interest to the "Vision 2030" image of the future pushed by Saudi and other GCC countries, but they remain the ones that really make a difference in people's everyday lives. The example of Beirut was given, where water pipes and sewage systems flood every time it rains. Instead of building flashy new cities in the desert or other regime "vanity projects" of questionable value and sustainability, experts pointed to the many ways that **life for ordinary inhabitants of the region could be tangibly improved**. Such crucial improvements may be seen as "unimportant" or a lesser priority by ruling government elites, but improving quality of life for historically-neglected and marginalised communities and the larger regional population would be extremely helpful, well-received, and may also positively affect other domains (e.g., irregular migration).

- Several experts agreed that we are living in a period of **Western civilisational decline**, politically but also economically, with one pointing out that "the West can manage it, but it cannot stop it." Broad agreement among experts about the need to accept this reality and to encourage humility in Western policy circles, noting that the Global South may have better ideas and solutions about how to combat climate change, foster sustainable development, and promote economic growth.

- A frequently discussed topic that arose several times and had broad con-sensus was the need to focus on the **construction/improvement of public infrastructure** in countries outside the GCC. One expert noted that "people are the end users of infrastructure" and that all infrastructure policy should be undertaken with these end users in mind, to improve their daily lives in concrete ways. While climate change is a trendy topic attracting donor funding today, this cannot substitute for meaningful and deep engagement that deals with structural inequalities and focuses on the "root causes of under-development and inequality."

- The crucial importance of infrastructure (politics of infrastructure), invest-ment in energy transformation policies, and regional climate governance (including water management) framework were stressed repeatedly as crucial to future sustainable development in the region. **Water governance frameworks** and water management in particular were discussed at length, including in light of anticipated climate-related effects on the region's hydrological cycle and its implications for agriculture and food security, as well as the urgent need to consider water justice issues. On transnational

technical cooperation in water governance, it was pointed out that it is both pragmatic and necessary to involve relevant non-state armed actors in water management and governance frameworks (e.g., northeast/northwest Syria).

- Some experts argued that "technical cooperation" on climate change matters (e.g., water management) might be somehow seen as "less political" and therefore act as a possible entry point to technical collaboration between actors with hostile relations (e.g., Syria, Turkey, Iran, etc.) that may then spill over to support conflict management efforts. Citing examples such as Egypt/COP28, however, other experts did not agree with this hopeful opinion and noted that climate change is also highly political; therefore, any purely "technical" collaboration on climate change would also be unlikely.

- While some mentioned the role of climate change in creating conflict (**climate-induced conflict hypothesis**) and cited the example of long Syrian drought and alleged causal relationship to 2011/12 uprisings there, it was strongly stressed that this was a political claim made by the Assad regime to avoid responsibility at the time, which then got "picked up" by the media and researchers and repeated, but which is not based in evidence. There was no clear consensus regarding the scope, extent, or likelihood of conflict-induced conflict, but it was nevertheless widely agreed that the **effects of conflict change are also always political (not just natural)**. This is true for infrastructural collapse, where lack of maintenance plus heavy flooding could lead to a dam collapsing (e.g., Derna in Libya 2023), but also true of any prospective climate-induced conflict that may occur in future: even if climate change may play a role, conflict is still inherently political, the result of policymaking and human choices, and not inevitable. In expert debates about climate-induced future conflict, legitimate doubts and good questions were raised that merit further investigation.

- **Rural exclusion** was repeatedly returned to as a critical issue for many reasons, including the fact that this is a driver of high rural-urban migration where migrants seek better jobs and functional infrastructure. **Investing in rural communities** is worthwhile on its own merits, but also because improving living standards in rural areas is also likely to decrease migration from rural areas. Sustainable development needs to focus on excluded people, those on "the margins of the margins," or else it will not work. Flashy GCC-inspired development models will not work and are unrealistic. Relatedly, it also was observed that "agriculture is becoming a field of resistance" for frustrate inhabitants that have been systematically excluded, ignored, and marginalised by their governments.

- Climate change implications are many, but one that will remain crucial is its impact on **women and girls**, where the risk of GBV, human trafficking, and sexual exploitation may rise as a result. Meanwhile, the inclusion of women in areas where they make up a lot of the workforce (for example, agriculture) is especially crucial. Agriculture and food security are also "women's issues" and directly affect women's lives; women should also be involved in important decision-making processes and in leadership roles.

- The critical importance of taking seriously the rapidly growing regional population and demographic "youth bulge"-related issues was repeated

by experts unanimously and with myriad examples. Many mentioned the importance of providing training/education and creating economic opportunities for **young people**, and of offering them hope and belief in the possibility of a credible, positive future.

- Regional adaptation capacity in the region will continue to be a challenge, where region has **a low level of adaptability to climate-related changes** (also part of the much-needed "green transition"). Climate-sensitive adaptation capacity needs to be considered in all new architecture and construction, including in post-conflict recon-struction. The region also has an indigenous tradition of climate adaptation, including in architecture, that should be taken seriously instead of importing techniques from outside. Questions were raised about why farmers, for example, have no safety nets or pro-tection in the face of increasingly unpredictable weather events. Adaptation capacity also refers to human ability to cope with the effects of climate change, such as farmers. For example, in other countries outside the region, insurance exists for farmers to avoid bankruptcy in the event of a crop failure, considering that no other external/state support is being offered and MENA governments have left citizens to their own devices. While farming insurance is just one small example, in general, figuring out **how to give the most vulnerable people the tools they will need to adapt to climate change** will be crucial to shaping a sustainable future for the region. The importance of taking **climate justice** seriously was also consistently noted throughout discussions.

- The important issue of **conflict-related environmental damage** was raised, particularly in reference to destruction and damage caused during conflict. The example of Ukraine, where relevant experts have been engaged in continuous environmental damage assessments throughout the war with Russia. These assessments are made in order to be used later when seeking reparations from conflict parties that destroy infrastructure, which in this case is Russia. However, such models are not being applied to the region and they should be. Why should Israel, for example, be able to destroy Palestinian environment without ever taking financial responsibility? The same parallel can be drawn across the region for other actors and conflicts, such as in the case of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Yemen.

- It was noted in several instances and with empirical examples (e.g., Libya) that in some cases, **incumbent ruling elites** may play and obstructionist role, preferring to stick to old, existing systems and therefore blocking any meaningful changes towards a sustainable future for the region that seriously considers climate change.

- It was also noted that the changing nature of governance in the region and the increasingly relevant role of **non-state armed actors** in performing public governance functions (e.g., northwest Syria) means that these actors should not be automatically ignored but rather considered as part of potential solutions to climate-related challenges where appropriate (e.g., water management).

- It was also noted that sustainable development and climate change-related assistance and programming in the region is too often "**donor-driven**",

reflecting external agendas, interests, and needs that will do nothing to enrich or benefit local population in the long term and, therefore, never lead to a sustainable future for the region.

- The "dilapidation of knowledge infrastructure" and of knowledge production in the region is a historical phenomenon that requires focused, long-term attention and investment to tackle. Some experts believed that it cannot be addressed without a natural "Mediterranean anchor." Seeing the Near East and North Africa as part of an integrated, **shared Mediterranean space** (not just as a securitised space to stop irregular migrants) is one way of making sure MENA region does not keep growing more and more isolated in the future (e.g., de-banking, reverse tech trends, "falling off the digital map as it is falling off the analogue one…in countries that initially had strong digital penetration"). Its potential as shared space of knowledge production, data collection, and academic exchange was mentioned alongside other creative possible forms of Mediterranean integration.

- There was some disagreement about the lack of reliable **empirical and baseline data** on a wide range of climate-related and development indicators, with some experts noting that the absence of baseline metrics makes measuring progress impossible. Taking a critical approach, it was noted that "data collection" in this manner is also a liberal democratic practice resting on flawed epistemological assumptions, before others pointed out that "official" data is no longer such a huge obstacle now that reliable open-source data exists. There was no consensus reached on this point, but important observations and critiques were shared and the question of **research and data collection** merits further investigation.

4. Policy Recommendations

While trend analysis is useful, this particular region is prone to ruptures and crisis events (natural disasters, political/security crises and tipping points). The question of how to deal with the *unexpected shocks and crises* that will continue to occur remains central. Switzerland's foreign policy position hinges on clarifying its overall strategic objective in the region: a.) stabilisation, or an elite-focused regime consolidation approach; b.) short-term crisis response management and a 'damage limitation' approach; or c.) a transformative sustainable governance future for the region that is people-centred, associated with human rights, equality, justice, and public welfare. To achieve the latter, a clear theory of change should be built into the next Strategy that can underpin policy formulation in priority areas.

The preparation of the next Strategy was also identified as an excellent opportunity for Switzerland to *thoroughly reassess* its regional foreign policy framework, including assessments of what has/has not worked in the past and relevant lessons learned, as well as a full (re-)evaluation and potential revision of the underlying assumptions that have shaped Swiss policy. It was widely agreed in the workshop that European states, including Switzerland to a lesser extent, are generally "confused" about the region and its inhabitants, and that such *external misperceptions and misunderstandings* expressed through policy intervention are accelerating internal regional deterioration.

This document assumes that Switzerland's strategic objective in the region is to pursue **a sustainable governance agenda** anchored in human rights, and that its response to the controversial question "Security for whom?" is "all inhabitants of MENA societies." If so, then this will require a *holistic, coherent approach* that realistically combines the key elements that are necessary to achieve it in the *medium-to-long term* (e.g., international legal standards and expertise, protection of refugees, sustainable energy, education reform and vocational training), and that utilises the *potential leverage* and added value all of Switzerland's considerable "soft power," namely its extensive public/private resources and in-country assets (including influential global actors such as private corporations, International Geneva actors and NGOs, university and scientific networks, access to regional elites, etc.). The various risks and negative consequences of taking a "siloed" or disjointed approach to the region were repeatedly emphasised by all workshop participants, who also highlighted the need to ensure overarching policy coherence between public and private Swiss actors across the region, especially in politically-controversial contexts (e.g., Israel, Syria, Arabian Peninsula countries).

The main insights from the expert workshop are classified into "general" and "specific" policy recommendations and listed below.

4.1   General Policy Recommendations

- Recommendation that Switzerland **avoid adopting a "securitised" perspective** on the region and resist efforts by other actors to securitise (and/or instrumentally politicise) policy discourses and practices across all thematic domains: peace and conflict, migration and refugee protection, economic development, and sustainable development. Unlike the reductive securitisation approach, a more historically-grounded, comprehensive, and nuanced approach to the region grapples with the its complexity, genuinely reflects the preferences of local communities, and puts the rights and welfare of regional populations first. Such a holistic, people-centred approach directly serves Switzerland's strategic interests in the region, not least by reinforcing the country's hard-earned reputation as a neutral party committed to international law and universal values, such as human rights, equality, and justice.

- Recommendation that Switzerland focus its policy on doing only a **small number of things, more deeply**, to avoid being stretched too thin when trying to do to many things across different issue domains. The widely shared opinion was that Switzerland should try to invest heavily in only a small number of issue areas, essentially a call to narrow its focus while deepening engagement. A more strategic perspective is needed that revisits and updates *underlying assumptions* about the region, grapples with implications of projected trends, and considers what can be concretely achieved in the region in the next 5-10 years. Focusing on longer time scales also means progress can be made in priority areas such as fighting corruption and strengthening rule of law. Standing in stark contrast to the more shallow and short-sighted approaches being taken by other Western countries, a deeper, more focused approach along these lines would be positively received by regional populations and also reinforce Switzerland's credibility while improving governance outcomes.

- Through Swiss state organisations (e.g., SDC) and other relevant Swiss actors outside the government, **meso-level projects** and activities that target the **medium- and long-term** should be focused on across all priority domains. Switzerland should work with local communities wherever possible.

  - A corollary recommendation was to focus on "un-sexy" but realistic priorities, such as infrastructure or vocational training, which have concrete benefits for local communities and which require longer time frames to work. The recommendation suggests focusing on solving lots of smaller issues in a given domain that might be ignored or going under the radar, but that would immediately and tangibly impact people's everyday lives.

- Switzerland should consider its comparative advantage in **technical guidance** on a wide range of issues in concrete fields relevant to the future of the region, such as water management or farming, as well as its ability to *create new spaces for technical dialogue and exchanges* between technical actors (e.g., bureaucracies, civil service, private). This also includes technical support in areas such as international law, governance of natural

resources, green technology and climate-change adaptation, as well as promoting women's leadership and empowerment in these technical spaces and dialogues (e.g., women's roles in water management initiatives). This was highlighted as an opportunity across the region, including in Arabian Peninsula countries regarding water management and in Libya regarding the fight against corruption, as well as in other examples. Focusing on technical guidance also serves to signal to regional populations that Switzerland is a credible partner in building a sustainable future. While other countries may frame the MENA region as a mere "problem" to be solved, Switzerland can distinguish itself by showing through consistent, effective technical guidance that it appreciates and understands the region's considerable potential, and the importance of making incremental progress over time in concrete technical areas while investing in human resources. Ideally, the technical guidance itself would eventually strengthen governance and governing outcomes across the region, hopefully raising quality of life and improving socioeconomic conditions over time, thus potentially leading to decreased migration. A long-term approach focused on technical guidance and concrete problem-solving would also reinforce Switzerland's reputation as a well-intentioned and serious development partner across the region.

- Switzerland's traditional **good offices** role is more necessary than ever, yet also needs to be reassessed to determine exactly *where and with what tools* this role is going to be most effective in the coming years.

  - In a context where regional powers perceive the "West" in decline while other international actors are perceived to be rising, countries are more interested in solving their own conflicts. No longer perceived as a major convening power, Switzerland is instead increasingly seen as a potential facilitator and supporting partner in regional conflict management processes. Unlike other European powers or the United States, Switzerland remains well-placed to continue focusing on good offices/peace dialogue activities.

  - Considering innovation in peace/conflict management processes: to what extent can Switzerland support the region in setting up a more permanent, more stable conflict dialogue platform, process, or framework for the region?

- Switzerland's traditional role and expertise in the broad domain of **international law**, including humanitarian law and human rights law, remains more necessary and in demand than ever. To avoid undermining its historic reputation as a neutral, credible actor that is committed to and guided by international law, Switzerland should avoid inconsistent application of these principles in practice (i.e., ensure moral and policy consistency as much as possible, regardless of short-term political pressures) and continue to offer its expertise in support of international law and in protection of human rights. This includes continuing and expanding training and technical expertise provision across the region, including to the public sector, private sector, and relevant NGOs.

  - Suggestion to consider how the 'toolbox' that has been developed to protect the rights of Ukrainians after Russia's 2022 invasion (e.g., the

investigation of environmental damage caused by conflict for eventual reparations, refugee support and pro-tection, international criminal prosecutions for human rights abuses and question of justice) can be extended and applied to unresolved conflicts the region.

- Suggestion to consider how Switzerland can push for account-ability, justice, and international law through existing mechanisms (e.g., Blue Peace Initiative, water justice) and through forums such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union and its Middle East Committee.

- Recommendation in general for Switzerland to **rethink its positionality** vis-à-vis the region and vis-à-vis other European actors that may feel short-term pressures and "fear of missing out," leading to controversial foreign policy developments between EU and region that reinforce authoritarianism across the region (e.g., migration in North Africa, relations with Gulf states in light of Yemen war, regional normalisation with Israel, Syria despite no change in regime behaviour). Switzerland should maintain its *policy autonomy* and commitment to *Swiss values and principles* in its foreign policy, consistently championing the application of international law and dealing fairly with the region on its own terms. Protecting, upholding, and reinforcing Switzerland's hard-earned credibility and historic reputation as a positive, trusted actor in the region directly serves Switzerland's long-term strategic interests across all policy domains.

- Switzerland must **maintain its reputation and credibility** by consistently taking a principled stance in defence of its values and principles, in both rhetoric and practice, on the major issues affecting the region across all thematic domains. Moral consistency is essential to continue being able to play its niche foreign policy roles (e.g., good offices, peace dialogue facilitation, human rights, international law expertise) and to expand and create new economic and scientific partnerships with local stakeholders. Even if/when the international and regional political environment changes, Switzerland should always be actively positioning itself on the side of justice and protection of human rights on any given policy issue, regardless of short-term convenience and particularly as relates to the equal application of international law. Reputational risks can be mitigated by *standing by its principles in practice*, resisting *short-term thinking*, and avoiding close association with controversial policy positions that are widely *unpopular* with regional populations, even if they are popular among ruling elites. Consider the risks that Switzerland's traditional reputation (e.g., as a technical authority on international legal matters or as a credible facilitator of conflict management dialogue) may be directly and seriously undermined by its positions in other areas (e.g., normalisation with Israel, Syria, relations with Gulf Cooperation Council states, elite corruption). A corollary recommen-dation is to focus on how to build and refine Switzerland's "foreign policy brand" in the region. To protect Switzerland's strategic interests in the region, the country must ensure that it is perceived by regional populations as a credible, honest actor that consistently applies its own values and principles, as well as international law. Ignoring regional perceptions risks irrevocably damaging over time Switzerland's reputation and credibility as a positive, trusted partner in the region.

- Recommendation for Switzerland to use its **diplomatic leverage** where possible, with regional and European governments (and involved elites) to positively influence policy- and decision-making in the region towards a people-centred sustainable governance agenda, especially in the heavily securitised domain of migration and refugee protection. With Western governments in particular, Switzerland can speak out on matters of moral consistency, to play a unique role in pressuring other democracies to reconsider their complicity/support to regional authoritarian regimes and/or involvement in unresolved conflicts. While perhaps politically difficult or uncomfortable in the short-term, being seen to stand up for universal values of human rights and equality while rejecting harmful securitised approaches will in the medium- and long-term boost Switzerland's reputation and credibility in the eyes of regional populations. It is directly in Switzerland's strategic interests to clearly distinguish itself and its policies from other Western governments, and to use whatever diplomatic leverage it might have to positively influence external policy-making in the region, including through the multilateral system.

- Recommendation that Switzerland **continue to support**, not just financially but also through the secondment of its experts, the activities of vital humanitarian organisations in the region, such as **UNRWA** and **UNHCR**, various development agencies and other organisations in the region working on refugee protection and prevention of gender-based violence. This includes also pushing for much-needed institutional reform of these important organisations (and of the multilateral UN system in general) to improve performance outcomes and reinforce the legitimacy of these organisations.

- Recommendation for Switzerland, as an international donor in the multilateral system, to prioritise issues of **accountability, transparency, and coordination** between international organisations and development actors operating in the region, notably the multilateral UN agency system, in light of past mistakes, lack of coordination and policy incoherence, grave inefficiencies, and corruption scandals in the region, which are raising questions about the governance of these organisations, notably priority-setting and decision-making processes. Switzerland should use its influence to promote review of these organisations and steps towards greater accountability, transparency, and efficiency across the multilateral system.

4.2   Particular Entry Points and Opportunities

- As mentioned above, there was expert consensus that normalising and/or deepening relations with authoritarian regimes in the region, while ignoring their behaviour and demanding no change, is **not sustainable** in the long term and poses risks to Switzerland's reputation and regional credibility. This refers to the obvious issues around regional normalisation efforts with repressive regimes in Israel and Syria, but also to the potential repercussions of Swiss actors, both public and private, continuing to deepen relationships with the oil-rich Arabian Peninsula countries without thorough reflection of what this may mean in the long term, as other European states driven by a short-term political calculus may be doing. The need for Switzerland to maintain its **moral consistency** by dealing fairly in the region, and without legitimising or reinforcing regime elites and governments at the expense of local populations, was repeatedly stressed across all thematic domains, which are closely related and overlapping, and via a wide range of examples. While this would directly benefit the region, it is also in Switzerland's long-term strategic interest.

  - Experts positively recalled various examples of Switzerland standing up for international law and human rights, for example in its public statements after the recent floods in Derna or after the 2006 elections in Gaza. While pursuit of moral consistency may force Switzerland into a "contrarian" position sometimes on the global stage and this can be politically uncomfortable, it is still *recommended that the Swiss position remain consistent*. It is for the long-term benefit of the region's inhabitants, as well as for the long-term protection of the Swiss foreign policy "brand," that such clear moral stands must continue to be taken wherever possible. Switzerland should attempt to lead through example and it is perceived as well placed to do so.

- Switzerland was thought of as being positioned to continue playing a role in supporting the sustainability of peace in **Yemen**, with experts also flagging the potential risk to Switzerland's credibility as a peace facilitator in Yemen if this unfolds while it also works to deepen economic relations with involved conflict parties, namely Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

- Recommendation for Switzerland to **rethink its stated commitment to a two-state solution in Israel and Palestine**. For many reasons,[97] the two-state solution model is no longer feasible nor realistic, and the sole path forward is one towards some form of a binational, democratic state for both peoples. Experts in the workshop expressed no belief or confidence in the "peace process" as it stands today and stressed the need for a new shift in thinking about workable solutions for the future. In line with its own commitments to international and humanitarian law, Switzerland is well placed to play a leading role in putting this issue on the international agenda, including by making use of its considerable soft power and leverage in concerned capitals.

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[97]   See: Riccardo Bocco and Fritz Froehlich, with Farrah Hawana (eds), *UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees: Challenges for Developing a Strategic Vision* (Geneva: Graduate Institute of International Studies: 2022).

- Recommendation to extend Swiss **good offices** to the situation in Eastern Mediterranean, to facilitate dialogue between concerned parties and prevent future conflict. The importance of protecting Switzerland's legitimacy and credibility as a positive, neutral actor in the long-term, as discussed above, is also directly linked to its continued role as a trusted peace broker and conflict mediator in the region. If Switzerland wishes to continue positioning itself as such and playing this role in the region, then MENA public opinion and perceptions must be seriously considered as an integral part of all future policymaking.

  - Corollary recommendation that, if Switzerland wishes to position itself as a peace partner and dialogue facilitator in the region, it could consider opportunities presented in Jordan. Amman remains an important location for such dialogue between conflict parties and that is where many international organisations and NGOs are also present. Perhaps intensifying Swiss attention to this space might offer future opportunities and new entry points.

  - Corollary recommendation raised multiple times in relation to more than one issue: do not wait for other, larger European or Western powers to take responsibility for unresolved conflicts (e.g., France in Lebanon, or United States in Libya), because it was widely agreed that such states have no clear regional strategy and are unprepared to play a constructive role. Switzerland, however, should position itself as a realistic, pragmatic facilitator by focusing on those areas where some incremental progress might be made. It was generally agreed that Switzerland should not be "waiting" for other countries, but rather it should lead by example (maintaining its moral and legal commitments) and chart its own path to addressing governance challenges in the region in concrete ways.

- Recommendation to **reconceptualise migration** to include **all forms** of migration, not just refugee flows from areas of protracted conflict. This requires understanding the complex picture of migration: the many different forms of labour migration inside/outside the region, the implications of 'brain drain' dynamics and ongoing expulsion of talent from the region, rural-to-urban migration and migration from margin-alised rural/peri-urban areas to urban centres. A constructive, nuanced, non-securitised approach to migration may present a range of potential opportunities and entry points for Swiss engagement on migration, which would also directly serve Switzerland's long-term strategic interests in the region.

- Recommendation to take **human rights protection of refugees** and the 1951 Refugee Convention and its application in practice more seriously, to address a series of complex issues around return of refugees (Syria, Palestine) from neighbouring states, in order to give host countries in the region credible, workable policy options to address the millions of long-term refugees with low chance of return. The existing situation is unsustainable and must be improved.

  - Corollary recommendation to address the **destruction of UNRWA** schools and infrastructure in the occupied Palestinian territories by Israel, which does not then pay for reconstruction: sugges-tions to

apply environmental damage assessments and seek reparations from conflict parties that destroy infrastructure (e.g., as is currently being done in Ukraine case, with Russia held responsible for war damage).

- Corollary recommendation to focus on the upcoming issue of refugee populations, such as in northeast and northwest Syria, remaining officially **stateless** due to inability to access externally-acknowledged identity documents. Addressing this important issue is part of finding workable, practical solutions for refugees.

- Arabian Peninsula countries are both a problem and a solution regarding refugees in the region. These states can be pressured to become *"more responsible" global actors*, on par with their newly-asserted international status. As global actors, Switzerland can and should use its leverage to stress that the Gulf countries need to: 1) take seriously the situation of refugees in the region, including the implications for Palestinians if normalisation with Israel continues; 2) take seriously global norms and inter-national law, becoming a constructive international player and international donor; and 3) take seriously the need to resolve the Yemen conflict and protect civilians displaced there.

- Recommendation to focus on **disaster preparedness** (natural and human-caused), as much of the region remains unprepared even for today's weather challenges due to weak infrastructure in much of the region that is not resilient enough; investing in infrastructure rein-forcement and disaster response planning and preparedness would have concrete benefits for people's lives. In light of the fact that disaster preparedness has generally been neglected by most regional governments and that there is an urgent need for improvement in this area, Switzerland being seen to take concrete action on this humanitarian issue would also serve to boost its regional credibility in the long term, thus serving its strategic interests while tangibly improving humanitarian outcomes for regional populations if/when disaster strikes.

- Recommendation to more seriously consider the role of **information/ disinformation and media** in the migration domain, on both sides of the Mediterranean, with a strategic approach to communication, social media, and targeted information sharing to counter prevailing myths and misper-ceptions about migration to Europe.

- Recommendation to more seriously consider **mental health**, particularly among young people, in a region with no hope for an economic future and where despair is widespread, particularly in marginalised and excluded communities, and is also made worse through drug use. The region-wide problem with youth despair has multiple effects, including driving migration and suicide rates; it also leaves a gap in society that women are forced to fill.

- Recommendation to invest in **education and vocational training** across the region, where educational systems are in crisis and there is a large skills-labour mismatch alongside high youth unemployment. It is in Switzerland's strategic interest over time to consider how to invest in, collaborate with, and otherwise support regional youth, who would also be less inclined to immigrate outside the region if greater education, training, and employment

opportunities were available in MENA countries. Some suggestions of how to adapt the Swiss vocational training models to the region in a practical, realistic way were made:

- The crisis of education systems across the region needs in-vestment and support to be resolved, but in *areas governed by non-state armed actors* (such as northwest Syria), young people also have need for education and vocational training. It was suggested that Switzerland could fill this gap by focusing on such excluded populations.

- Corollary recommendation relates to the widely agreed reality that *"knowledge production and infrastructure" in the region is dilapidated* and in need of renewal, and the fact that Switzerland cannot tackle these historic, complex structural problems alone or from a short-term planning perspective. However, it was emphasised that Switzerland should focus on in this area and take knowledge production seriously, investing in knowledge production and practice sharing across the region. This also calls for seeing the Mediterranean as an anchor, with all countries on both sides as part of the same space, which should be further integrated if any initiatives to invest in knowledge production and practice sharing is to be effective.

- Consensus view among workshop participants that Switzerland should continue and expand investment in education and training across the region, including through institutional support to education institu-tions and through support to students and faculty (e.g., fellowships, exchanges, and other scholarships).

- Recommendation to continue focusing on promoting collaboration and cooperation on natural resources and climate justice, notably in the area of **water management** and **water governance**, and to continue supporting the Geneva Water Hub.

  - Recommendation for Switzerland to consider the role of **non-state actors in water governance**, since these actors are involved in this (e.g., Syria), and may need to be included in water governance initiatives. A corollary recommendation is to promote greater coordination with domestic actors inside countries, in order to bring historically excluded/ marginalised communities into water governance cooperation.

- Recommendation to take advantage of Switzerland as a hub for **education in emergency contexts** to offer technical support, via International Geneva and in-country networks.

  - A corollary recommendation is to rethink and reconsider the reality of protracted humanitarian crisis and ask whether some of these ongoing refugee "emergencies" that have endured for years should not instead be seen as "a new normal," prompting the need for serious reflection and debate among relevant practitioners about *short-term "humanitarian aid" programming versus long-term "development aid."* There is an opportunity for International Geneva to contribute by highlighting the impor-tance of such debates for the future of the region and by providing technical expertise and a space to substantively debate these crucial issues.

- A corollary recommendation was to consider how Switzerland and Swiss experts might be able to apply international legal expertise to support existing professional training programs among like-minded states (such as the NATO "Defense Education Enhancement Program") by reviewing and strengthening the legal foundations of defence education curricula around the world.

- Recommendation to take seriously **corruption** in the region, as well as its transnational and international dimensions, which is widely agreed to be a major, urgent challenge for countries across the region. In order to advance its own long-term strategic interests in the region—by concretely improving MENA governance outcomes and upholding its reputation as a positive actor committed to international law—Switzerland should identify and/or create entry points and opportu-nities to work with state institutions, banking sectors, and local communities on fighting corruption.

  - Particularly in Libya, it was stressed that corruption continues to worsen and that one approach here could be to work directly with technocrats, civil servants, and other bureaucrats collecting data and attempting to fight corruption alone; these technocrats take great risk to do so and attempt to report to American representatives in Tripoli, but no action is taken. Switzerland could step in to support these technocrats, for example, providing especially its finance and accounting expertise.

  - In Lebanon, it was suggested that Switzerland has an opportunity to contribute to justice and accountability on the question of elite-led theft and money laundering: due to the influence of its banking sector, Switzerland should encourage investigation into ill-gotten gains and related accountability efforts.

- Recommendation for Switzerland to work to create a regional "ecosystem" of stakeholders and expertise, to facilitate the long-term "green" transition in progress due to the effects of climate change, creating linkages with partners and different institutions (playing an important **facilitating role**).

  - A corollary recommendation is to help **raise awareness** among regional populations of climate change and its projected effects on the region, where surveys indicate that only a minority of people consider this to be a serious problem facing the region.

- Recommendation to take seriously the **growing inequality** and **exclusion** in the region, between countries and subregions and within countries, across all domains and at all levels, including such examples of income inequality, unequal access to healthcare, education, and natural resources. Particular attention was called to the people and rural communities that have been often ignored, neglected, marginalised, and excluded by national authorities: these are the forgotten "flyover country" rural and peri-urban areas where much of regional population lives but very little investment is made. It was stressed that too much attention is given to the main urban centres, although it was also pointed out that simply "connecting the main urban centres together" cannot be a sustainable development strategy. Supporting and empowering rural communities was identified as an area

of opportunity for Switzerland. Greater investment and Swiss expertise could serve to lower the inequality gap between urban and rural areas, which could gradually improve quality of life in rural areas and perhaps lead to declining migration from these areas over time—something that also advances Switzerland's own strategic interests in the region.

- Corollary recommendations include increasing focus on matters of local governance and decentralisation around the region, such as in Lebanon.

- Recommendation to invest in in the **farming/agriculture sector** and in rural populations in the historically marginalised and excluded swathes of the region, i.e., everywhere outside of main urban capitals. Supporting rural development and sharing Swiss agricultural expertise and farming techniques should remain priority areas. Strengthening development of this sector could gradually improve quality of life in rural areas and perhaps lead to declining migration from these areas over time—something that also advances Switzerland's own strategic interests in the region.

- Recommendation to focus on **infrastructure** development in the region, particularly in light of the low level of adaptability to climate-related changes (part of the much-needed "green transition"). Adaptation capacity needs to be considered in all new construction, including post-conflict reconstruction.

  - A corollary recommendation is to *strengthen other forms of adaptability* present in other countries, but not in the region; for example, insurance for farmers to avoid bankruptcy in the event of a crop failure, considering that no other external/state support is offered. Figuring out how to give the most vulnerable people the tools they will need to adapt to climate change is crucial.

- **Knowledge/digital economy** are potential areas where Switzerland can contribute its technical expertise and training, and via *scientific and educational exchanges*, which were unanimously described as vital and an area to further invest in and expand if possible. It was also suggested that focus on digital economy can offer new opportunities to fight corruption, increase accountability, and improve traceability of currency (e.g., by digitising banking sectors and moving away from cash) and opportunities to improve the performance and transparency of public institutions (e.g., e-services).

- Recommendations to take advantage of Swiss technical expertise and research in **new technology** areas, such as artificial intelligence and robotics, as well as "green transition" technologies. However, doubts were expressed about the cyber dialogue priorities; these were **not** widely seen as effective and the point was made that technical/new technology projects cannot by themselves replace or precede substantive political dialogue on unresolved issues.

- Recommendation to continue focusing on **gender equality** and its integration as a cross-cutting theme across all activities. One of the first victims of climate change are women and girls, and this is something that should be considered, along with the need to more meaningfully involve women in decision-making and policy-making, especially in sectors where they are overwhelmingly employed (e.g., nursing/healthcare, farming).

- Some also raised the importance of promoting women's empowerment in Arabian Peninsula states with an eye to reinforcing meaningful social change on this issue, and of being wary of "cosmetic" changes designed to project a positive image to an external audience.

- Others noted that the opportunity for Switzerland to work more closely with the Inter-Parliamentary Union, located in Geneva, and the Middle East Committee; Switzerland is perceived to have significant leverage in this arena and should be encouraged to take a more active role there to support women's empowerment.

- Recommendation to continue focusing on **youth and young people**, through aforementioned investments in education and vocational training, but also as a cross-cutting issue that should be considered in all domains and all future initiatives. Although suffering from the effects of structural corruption and nepotism, as well as larger economic problems, young people in the region have good ideas and innovative solutions that merits Switzerland's continued support and engagement. It is in Switzerland's strategic interest over time to consider how to collaborate with and support regional youth, who would be less inclined to immigrate outside the region if greater education, training, and employment opportunities were available. From a long-term perspective, young people in MENA countries will also be the future leaders and representatives of the region; it makes sense for Switzerland to invest in them, support them, and work closely with them now, to cultivate constructive and collaborative relationships that will be helpful later. It is therefore important to take into account the opinion of regional youth and consider how Switzerland is perceived; to preserve and protect its reputation and credibility in young people's eyes, Switzerland should do its best to ensure its policies across the region are consistent with its own values and international legal commitments.

- Recommendation to support **empirical data collection** and research across all domains around the region, in light of the paucity of reliable data on a wide range of indicators (notably, those related to water resources, climate change, etc.); knowledge generation and creative thinking on policy solutions for the region is needed, but baseline data on key indicators is also necessary.

- Other areas of potential focus include **historical memory** and **transitional justice**. In particular, it was suggested that Switzerland could play a good offices or peace facilitation role in the Western Sahara conflict and promote/lend expertise to transitional justice mechanisms there.