European Parliament

Security challenges in the MENA region

The wave of violence and political turbulence engulfing the entire Middle East and North Africa (MENA) poses significant security challenges not only for the countries of the region, but also beyond, including for the European Union (EU).

Violence and instability across the region

Despite hopes raised by the 'Arab Spring', a grim political reality of conflict and instability has settled in across the wider MENA region (from Morocco in the West to the Eastern Mediterranean, Iraq, Iran and the Arabian Peninsula/the Gulf states). Civil wars and conflicts currently plague Syria, Libya and Yemen. Moreover, the political and security vacuum has led to the rise of transnational jihadism, and of ISIL/Da'esh as its most brutal manifestation. Due to its territorial advances inside Iraq and Syria, its footholds in Libya and reportedly Yemen, as well as pledges of allegiance from other terrorist groups beyond the region, ISIL/Da'esh has become a significant threat.

Morocco and Algeria experienced minor protests during the 'Arab Spring' and, through limited political and economic reforms, the regimes managed to stay in power. In **Egypt**, the military brought to power President Abdel Fatah el-Sisi, replacing the Islamist Mohamed Morsi and setting off the crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood. **Tunisia** remains the democratic exception, but instability in Libya and jihadi militants pose an increasing threat to its fragile stability, as proven by terrorist attacks in Tunis and, most recently, Sousse.

Against the background of complex regional power relations and intensified strategic competition between actors in the region (the Iranian-Saudi rivalry), the stalled Middle East Peace Process, political disintegration and weakened states, conflict spill-over, growing sectarian divisions along ethnic, religious, confessional or tribal lines, Kurdish aspirations and transnational jihadism, observers affirm that the only strategic certainty about the region is uncertainty. Economically, the picture is mixed. Conflict has affected economic prospects in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen. Conversely, the oil-rich Gulf states still experience growth, but low oil prices and structural problems will constrain further development, as well as financial outflows to other countries in the region. Iran's economy will depend on an eventual agreement on its nuclear programme. Finally, climate change, food and water shortages add further to the region's challenges.

Security challenges

The turmoil in the region poses significant security challenges to its countries and Europe:

- An unprecedented humanitarian crisis: hundreds of thousands of civilians have died and more than 15 million people been displaced since 2011, while refugees strain neighboring states' socio-economic systems;
- More than 20 000 foreign fighters joined the ranks of ISIL/Da'esh and other terrorist groups in the region, and pose a significant direct threat to their homelands upon return;
- Regionalisation of conflicts and growing sectarianism exacerbate spill-over risks to other states;
- The flow of illicit weapons (with Libya as a major source) and other types of trafficking;
- Energy (e.g. oil supply disruptions) and maritime security risks.

The European Union

The EU approach has mainly focused on encouraging political and economic reforms and cooperation between the countries in the region and with the EU, but with limited results. Experts point to the need for a strategic approach, more differentiation and support for security reforms and economic cooperation, possibly in a joint transatlantic approach. In 2015, the Council adopted the EU regional strategy for Syria, Iraq and the ISIL/Da'esh threat and is discussing the EU's role in re-launching the Middle East Peace Process. The EU is also supporting diplomatic efforts towards conflict resolution, in Syria, Libya and Yemen.

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