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TEN YEARS AFTER THE ARAB SPRING: DEMOCRATIC EXPECTATIONS AND DISILLUSIONS

Preliminary Draft Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2011-2012 uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa raised high expectations for the democratisation of the region's societies and for a greater respect of the fundamental rights of the populations. Ten years after the Arab revolutions, some progress – varying from country to country and often timid – can be credited to the populations. The stablest countries are those that have listened to the demands of their citizens.

However, all the hopes roused by the 2011-2012 uprisings have not yet been fulfilled. From 2013 onwards, with the noteworthy exception of Tunisia, there have been increasing democratic setbacks in many respects. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates existing challenges, reveals the inefficiency of some regimes, and reinforces their authoritarian and repressive leanings.

The frustrations that sparked the 2011-2012 uprisings are still very much alive. Since 2019, these tensions have resurfaced in several countries in the form of popular uprisings. These revolts show that the processes of transformation and liberalisation of the region's societies initiated ten years ago are ongoing. It is both a sign and a result of an underlying globalisation trend bringing about structural changes towards which Middle Eastern and North African society has been and still is reacting.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The wave of popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in 2011-2012 in response to the immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia in 2010 – generally regarded as the “trigger” for the revolts – raised high expectations at the time. The fall or decline of most long-standing authoritarian regimes – which had come to the end of a cycle – held the promise that these movements would pave the way for the emergence of fairer, more prosperous, and also more democratic societies.

2. Indeed, these uprisings have led to some – albeit timid and fragile – breakthroughs over the past decade. A more informal civil society has emerged and is today a force for change. After playing a major role in the uprisings, young people have continued to make their voices heard and express their hopes and expectations, both through greater civic activism and the extensive use of social media. Women have also gained a more prominent place in public society and have secured some improvements in their fundamental rights. These social breakthroughs endure to this day.

3. However, the euphoria of the uprisings soon gave way to a certain disillusion. In Morocco and Jordan, the economic model is more adapted to globalisation and the legitimacy of the regimes is recognised by the population, enabling the latter to use peaceful channels to address their demands. Elsewhere, a counter-revolutionary wave has dashed the hopes of liberalisation in most of the region's societies, with the notable exception of Tunisia. In Syria, Libya and Yemen, the political situation remains unresolved and these countries are engulfed in lethal conflicts. Lastly, other regimes, such as Egypt, have been restored to an authoritarian system. The reactionary domestic actors were supported by other states in the region.

4. During the period that followed the uprisings, especially from 2013-2014 onwards, there have been increasing setbacks across the region in many respects. As a result, formal civil society organisations are now facing a firm takeover. In many cases, the regimes restrict access to information. Journalists, human rights activists, and critics face violations of their freedom of expression; they can be victims of violence or subject to the manipulation of legal authorities. The armed forces and security services have once again taken centre stage in the political governance of a number of countries in the region. The often divided and weak civil institutions have failed to impose any effective democratic control over the sector.

5. However, since 2019, there has been a resurgence of uprisings in the region. New demonstrations are happening in Algeria, Iraq, Sudan, and Lebanon, among others. In all these countries, demonstrators are demanding better democratic governance and greater respect for fundamental rights using peaceful and non-sectarian methods, as they did during the 2011-2012 protests. These events have led to the resignation of Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika and the downfall of Omar al-Bashir's regime in Sudan. These actions show that the deep discontent behind the 2011-2012 uprisings is still alive and that the process they triggered is not yet complete.

6. Since 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the region's democratic transformation in two ways. On the one hand, it strengthens authoritarian and repressive tendencies because regimes use health measures to impose additional restrictions on fundamental rights, including the right of expression and assembly. On the other hand, the health emergency reveals the inadequacy of the authorities' response and gives a new role and impetus to civil society. Moreover, the pandemic also tends to intensify the socio-economic hardships that have stoked the fires of dissent over the past decade.

7. This preliminary draft report examines the achievements and setbacks in terms of democratisation and respect for fundamental rights in the MENA countries during the decade that followed the 2011-2012 uprisings. While a report by the Political Committee of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly looks at geopolitical issues, this draft report examines the region's domestic developments over the past ten years in the following five areas: the transformation of civil society and its place in the democratisation process; the lack of adequate protection of freedom of expression and of the press; the poor observance of women's rights; the changing role of young people in society; and the changing nature of civilian/military relations. Each chapter of this report provides a general overview of the situation since 2011-2012 followed by two specific case studies.

II. A CHANGING CIVIL SOCIETY

8. The Arab uprisings raised high hopes for the emergence of a civil society that could sustain democratic processes in the MENA countries. From December 2010 onwards, civic organisations played a major role in the protests in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and Morocco, among others. In the euphoria of the early achievements of the uprisings, the expectations of civil society were great. It was supposed to play a critical role in present and future social and democratic changes by ensuring that the interests of the population and its various groups were taken into account by governments. In this way, civil society would have helped to boost the economic prosperity, as well as the security and democratic resilience of the region in the long term.

9. Despite some progress, most of these expectations remain unfulfilled. The active participation of civil society in constitutional reforms intended as a prerequisite for democracy, the formation of new political parties, and the political alternatives are so many examples of the progress made towards the appropriation of the state by societies hitherto excluded from institutions (Schmid, 2018). But the expected evolution of civil society in the MENA countries remains limited. In many cases, there has been an increased repression of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and activists. For example, Civicus – an NGO dedicated to reinforcing civil society – indicated in a report in 2020 that the civic space remains closed in most of the countries in the region. This is the case in Egypt and Iraq. Likewise, in conflict-stricken Libya, Syria and Yemen, many groups and associations have disbanded as a result of the violence as well as material and financial difficulties. In Tunisia, Morocco, Jordan, and Lebanon, Civicus qualifies civic space as “obstructed”, and as being “repressed” in Algeria (Civicus, 2020a). In Bahrain, some organisations were disbanded for opposing the regime or for monitoring the human rights situation. In Saudi Arabia and Qatar, civil society is still embryonic as a result of the laws impeding its expansion (Yom, 2015). In the Gulf countries, there is a strong focus on a new social contract prioritising the liberalisation of private spaces as well as economic growth more attuned to globalisation (Levallois, 2017).

10. In many countries of the region, civil society representatives face increasing persecution. Threats, assaults, reprisals, judicial persecution and arbitrary detention are all being used to silence dissenting voices (Amnesty International, 2019). Moreover, the work of civil society organisations is hampered by a restrictive legal environment. National legislation often makes their registration complicated and is sometimes used to justify restrictions on freedom of association and assembly (FHI 360, 2020). This is notably the case in Morocco, Jordan, and Kuwait, where a number of independent associations survive but find their work severely hampered (Yom, 2015).

11. Despite the difficulties facing civil society in the MENA region, it remains a force for change. In many countries, it shows a promising resilience. Civil society actors have found the tools to pursue their efforts while reaching out to a wider audience. For instance, the organisational

capacity and resources of civil society organisations have recently improved in several countries, including Egypt and Iraq (FHI 360, 2020).

12. Officially registered organisations being faced with stringency and takeover, the region's civil society is increasingly assuming a more informal profile. Thus, loosely structured citizen groups have played a pivotal role in the popular protests that have rocked a number of countries since 2019, including Algeria, Sudan, Iraq, Lebanon, and Tunisia. In Iraq for instance, the protests taking place since 2019 were originally organised by isolated individuals who later assembled into informal groups (FHI 360, 2020).

13. The COVID-19 health crisis has had a dual effect on the development of civil society in the MENA region. On the one hand, it has boosted existing authoritarian dynamics and weakened the financial and material capacity of the organisations constituting it. This is because the widespread economic impact of the pandemic is expected to significantly affect the financial viability – and consequently the capacity – of civil society organisations (FHI 360, 2020). At the same time, these organisations face increased repression by the authorities under the guise of the fight against the pandemic (Human Rights Watch, 2021a). In Algeria, for example, the authorities used the response to the health crisis to silence the opposition and curb the Hirak protest movement, arresting several of the opposition's activists who had originally refused to suspend it in March 2020 (Cherif et al., 2020).

14. On the other hand, the pandemic has unleashed criticism by exposing the authorities' inability to deal with the health crisis. In Egypt and Iraq for example, civil society has exposed the authorities' lack of preparedness for the crisis and the role of their poor governance in the ineffectiveness of their response (Cherif et al., 2020). The pandemic has also brought to light the crucial role of civil society in the face of a regime's incompetence and inaction. As a consequence, a number of NGOs have rallied to offer practical health assistance to the population. In parts of Iraq recently freed from ISIL for instance, civil society organisations have shifted their efforts to address the pandemic (Cherif et al., 2020).

A. TUNISIA

15. Under the strict rule of Ben Ali's regime, Tunisian civil society has played a pivotal role in the democratic process since 2011, particularly in the preparation of the 2014 Constitution. In 2015, four civil society organisations were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for their role in national dialogue and the democratic development of Tunisia.

16. Today, Tunisia's dynamic civil society is setting an example in the region. Civic engagement has significantly grown in the post-revolutionary period and the number of civic organisations in the country has sharply increased. Nine thousand organisations were formed in the three years that followed the revolution (more than double the number before the revolution) and more than 22,000 were registered in 2019 (FHI 360, 2020). However, public funding available for the work of these organisations is scarce and most of them rely on foreign financial backing. Nevertheless, these organisations have become key players in the Tunisian democratic process, both at the national and local scales. This role is widely acknowledged by the public.

17. The legislative framework protects the diversity and freedom of action of civil society organisations. However, some aspects remain complex and prohibitive, particularly with respect to registration and tax exemption procedures. A law adopted in 2018 likens these organisations to companies, imposing expensive registration obligations on them. Failure to comply with these obligations exposes their representatives to a fine equivalent to US\$4,000 and up to one year in prison. Furthermore, the National Registration Board can refuse applications for the registration of new organisations (Freedom House, 2020a).

18. The COVID-19 pandemic emphasised the strength of Tunisian democracy. In the face of the crisis, many organisations were able to reorient their activities towards public health, thereby proving their capacity to adapt and transform. Among other things, they organised campaigns to raise awareness of the health crisis, imported and distributed medical supplies and supported the authorities by manning telephone hotlines. Additionally, fears that the democratic process and building of civil society would be derailed emerged when the government was temporarily granted emergency powers in March 2020 as part of the pandemic, but these were quickly dispelled (Cherif et al., 2020; Yerkes, 2020).

B. LEBANON

19. In Lebanon, civil society presents a more mitigated example. On the whole, non-governmental organisations are free to operate without hindrance since 2005, following the end of the Syrian occupation. However, they face structural obstacles preventing their development, such as the confessional nature of Lebanese society and institutions, rampant corruption and lack of transparency. Moreover, the legal framework is somewhat outdated, since the law on associations with which these organisations must comply is still largely based on the provisions adopted in 1909, under the Ottoman Empire (Freedom House, 2020b).

20. The Arab uprisings did not lead to major advances in addressing these challenges. On the contrary, we have even seen democratic setbacks in some areas. For example, the authorities have made registration of NGOs more difficult since the start of the popular protest movement in October 2019. Freedom of assembly is protected by the Constitution and is usually respected by the authorities, yet security forces frequently used excessive force against protesters, often with impunity. Scores of participants were interrogated after participating in these protests. Some, including journalists and activists, faced charges of insults and defamation designed to silence them (Freedom House, 2020b).

21. However, this protest movement has led to increased civic participation. Women's groups are particularly prominent, and have also engaged in the organisation of specific events on women's rights (UN Women, 2019). Most notably, the demonstrations held since 2019 have been characterised by their interfaith and anti-sectarian aspect and have featured civic organisations from all sides.

22. Combined with the August 2020 Beirut explosions and the COVID-19 pandemic, the current economic climate is putting pressure on the financial capacities of civil society organisations, which are also impacted by the recent decline in foreign funding (FHI 360, 2020). Given these difficulties and the government's inaction, civil society is now playing an increasingly important role. Since the Beirut harbour explosion, civil society organisations such as Beit el Baraka have contributed to the rebuilding and relief efforts, thus proving the resilience of Lebanese civil society (Daou, 2020).

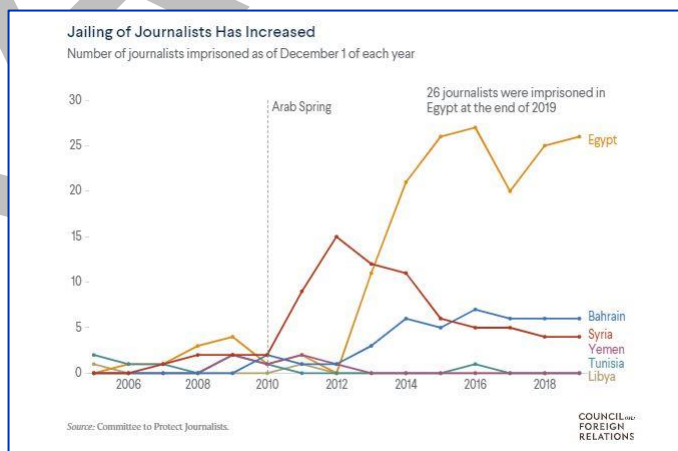
III. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND OF THE PRESS REMAIN UNDER STRICT CONTROL

23. The Arab uprisings raised high expectations for free speech in MENA countries. The guarantee and respect of freedom of expression and of the press were central to the demands of the demonstrators. Many people involved in the 2011-2012 uprising assumed the role of citizen journalists to document the resolve and achievements of the demonstrators, but also the repression they faced. Ten years after the uprisings, the momentum for emancipation through speech has fizzled out. Many of the region's leaders reinstated – and often increased – their authority to silence the population through the repression of the press and of the opposition, the censorship of Internet sites and social media, and the manipulation of anti-terror laws. For example, Reporters Without Borders estimates that the MENA region is currently one of the most dangerous in the world for journalists (Reporters Without Borders, 2020a). Experts estimate the

situation regarding press freedom and freedom of expression to be worse today than in the years leading up to the revolutions (Robinson, 2020).

24. In an attempt to limit the risk of protests, many leaders of the region's countries restrict freedom of information and expression by cutting off the population's access to certain websites and social media. This is because of the key role played by digital technologies in the revolutions of 2011-2012 in enabling the organisation of group actions and the dissemination of information that contributed to their spread (Zayani, 2019). In December 2010, the dissemination of images showing the immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi on social media was a major inspiration for the Sidi Bouzid protests, which are generally recognised as the beginning of the Arab Spring uprisings. Over the past decade, the leaders of many countries in the region have therefore severely increased their control over online freedom of expression, in response to the risk posed by these platforms to their continued rule (Brookings Institution, 2018). Citizens face prosecution for comments shared online criticising the authorities or their actions. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights recently issued credible reports that almost a thousand people were being prosecuted for participating in the Revolution of Smiles (Hirak Movement) or for posting messages criticising the Algerian government on social media (OHCHR, 2021a). In 2019, Amnesty International recorded 136 people imprisoned across the region for expressing their opinions online (Amnesty International, 2019). The conditions of trial and imprisonment of Ahmed Mansour, a dissident in the United Arab Emirates convicted in 2017 of "harming the reputation of the state", are regularly deplored by UN human rights experts (Barthe, 2021). In addition, several countries periodically block their populations' access to Internet sites. This is the case of Saudi Arabia and Iran, which are amongst the countries with the toughest censorship in the world (CPJ, 2021). Similarly, since 2017, the Egyptian authorities have blocked more than 500 websites, including local and international media with content that was critical of the authorities (Freedom House, 2020c).

25. Journalists are also the target of repressive policies. They are at risk of arbitrary detention and physical harm as a result of exercising their profession. This is particularly the case in countries in the conflict region, but also in other, more stable countries. In Morocco, for example, journalist Omar Radi was given a four-month suspended sentence in March 2020 for a tweet criticising a judge (Le Monde, 2020). In the last decade, 50 journalists were killed in the region because of their professional activity, including 28 in Yemen, Syria, and Libya (Reporters Without Borders, 2020b).



Among these, Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi was brutally murdered in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October 2018. Meanwhile, Roohollah Zam, the editor-in-chief of the Iranian channel Amad News Telegram, was abducted in Iraq before being executed in Iran in December 2020 (Lee and Bennett, 2019; Amnesty International, 2020a). In December 2020, the Committee to Protect Journalists reported 89 journalists imprisoned in ten countries in the region, the highest number ever. Saudi Arabia and Egypt are among the world's four countries with the most journalists in prison (CPJ, 2020).

26. Journalists, human rights activists and political opponents also face an increasing use of different forms of pressure. In several countries in the region, authorities attempt to intimidate them through the use of summonses for interrogation, police visits to their homes, and travel bans, among other things (Civicus, 2020a). In some cases, the financing or ownership of media outlets by political figures and parties also undermines the independence of journalists in the region.

In Morocco and Tunisia in particular, the economic dependence of many of the media on political players is a source of polarisation and politicisation of content. Lastly, the Gulf States use their extensive financial resources to exert influence over certain media outlets in the region (Brookings Institution, 2018). These practices drive journalists, human rights advocates and political opponents to practise self-censorship for fear of reprisals.

27. The COVID-19 health emergency has led to further restrictions on freedom of expression and the press in the region. Using the pretext of the fight against the pandemic, the authorities of many countries in the region have scaled up their repression. In Egypt in particular, the government is using the crisis to arrest scores of journalists and citizens and block websites, supposedly because of their involvement in disseminating disinformation about the pandemic and the authorities' response to it (Tahrir Institute, 2020; Salem, 2020). In Tunisia, bloggers were arrested for criticising the authorities' response to the pandemic (Amnesty International, 2020b).

A. JORDAN

28. In the face of the discontent expressed by the Jordanian population in 2011-2012, King Abdullah II promised to initiate a political reform process that would lead to greater respect for fundamental freedoms. Indeed, the limitation of freedom of expression and censorship of the press were among the protesters' primary grievances.

29. Over the past decade, the situation regarding freedom of expression and of the press in the country has not improved and remains worrying. The authorities keep a close eye on the work of journalists, human rights defenders, and opponents. As a result, the country is ranked 130th out of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders' press freedom index. Meanwhile, journalists must be affiliated to the government-controlled Jordanian Press Association to exercise their profession. Following the 2012 amendment of the press and publications law, the authorities have intensified their censorship of the media, particularly online where hundreds of websites have been blocked (Reporters Without Borders, 2021). Additionally, the authorities use a number of laws to silence – and sometimes imprison – journalists, human rights defenders, and opponents (Freedom House, 2020e).

30. The COVID-19 health crisis has further exacerbated this trend. In April 2020, the authorities passed a decree punishing the dissemination of panic-inducing information regarding the pandemic in the media or online, with a penalty of up to three years in prison. Several journalists, citizens and opponents were arrested following this decree after they criticised the authorities' response to the crisis (Human Rights Watch, 2020a). At the same time, the authorities used the argument about limiting public gatherings to prevent the spread of the coronavirus as a justification for the repression of a teachers' protest movement in the summer of 2020 (Safi, 2020). The growing restrictions on the rights to freedom of expression – including against journalists reporting on the authorities' response to COVID-19 and its impact on vulnerable groups or in the case of the Jordanian Teachers' Association – were reported by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR, 2021b).

B. BAHRAIN

31. In 2011, protests demanding greater political freedoms – including freedom of expression and of the press – broke out in Bahrain. The protests mostly involved members of the Shia majority, but also Sunni opponents. However, the Sunni monarchy violently quashed the protests. Since then, the authorities have been routinely tracking down and imprisoning – and sometimes torturing – journalists, bloggers and human rights defenders who took part in the protests (Priest, 2015). They also stripped 350 protesters of their citizenship to force them into silence (Amnesty International, 2019). In 2017, the only remaining dissent newspaper, Al-Wasat, was closed down on the orders of the authorities (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Its founder, Karim Fakhrawi, was

tortured to death while in detention in 2011 (Al-Jazeera, 2011). While the country's constitution guarantees freedom of expression and of the press, the government manipulates a law on the press and an anti-terrorism law to restrict the rights of journalists (Freedom House, 2020d). Consequently, the country's media landscape is looking even more homogenised and restricted than it did before the Arab uprisings.

32. Thus, to access objective information or express their own criticism, citizens have turned to websites and social media over the past decade. However, the authorities' repression is also fierce on these platforms. As an example of this, Freedom House reports that between June 2019 and May 2020, at least 25 people were arrested, detained or prosecuted for their online activities. The Cyber Crime Directorate of the Ministry of Interior monitors websites and social media, forcing the closure of those deemed "malicious." In addition, access to many foreign news sites is being blocked. These restrictions were tightened even further under the guise of responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. Social media users and at least one journalist were summoned and arrested after posting stories criticising the issue (Freedom House, 2020d; Al-Jazeera, 2020). The release of human rights defender Nabeel Rajab in the summer of 2020, after he had been detained since December 2018 for his activities, is a positive step. But dozens of human rights defenders, political opponents, and journalists remain imprisoned in Bahrain (Human Rights Watch, 2020b).

IV. WOMEN'S RIGHTS, TANGIBLE ALBEIT SMALL AND TENUOUS ACHIEVEMENTS

33. Women played a crucial role in the Arab uprisings. The rallies of women in the streets and public gardens of Arab countries calling for the overthrow of repressive regimes that ruled for decades will remain in public memory (Karman, 2020). In Libya, almost one in five women played an active role in the 2011 revolution (Abdul-Latif, 2013). This civic involvement continues to this day, including during the protest movements starting in 2019. Nonetheless, the high expectations about the inclusion of women in democratisation processes voiced during the Arab uprisings were largely unfulfilled. While some progress has been made over the past decade in terms of the recognition and respect of women's rights, women still face unequal rights, domestic and sexual violence, as well as restrictions on their economic participation and underrepresentation in politics and peace processes.

34. The human rights of numerous women in the MENA region are still not legally recognised. For example, the family laws in 13 of the region's countries still allow religious courts to perform marriages of women under the age of consent. In Iran, the age for marrying girls is 13, while in Yemen there is no minimum age limit. Similarly, only half of the countries in the region have passed a law against domestic violence (US Legal Library of Congress, 2020). However, some positive legal achievements are to be lauded. For instance, in 2017, Lebanon, Jordan and Tunisia abolished laws enabling rapists to avoid prosecution by marrying their victims (Begum, 2017). But even where progress has been achieved, implementation remains hesitant.

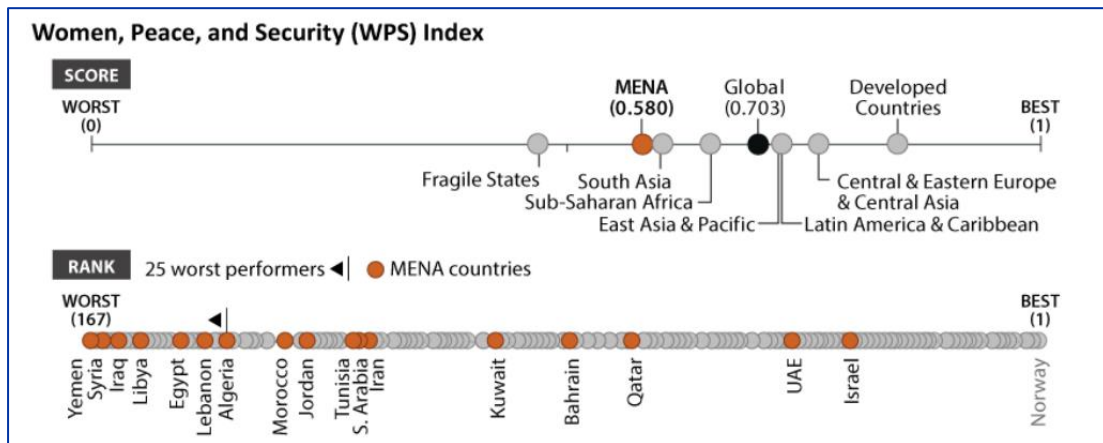
35. Additionally, women are still facing domestic and sexual violence. In 2016, for example, 60% of Tunisian women experienced domestic violence (Blaise, 2018) while in 2013, 99.3% of Egyptian women were subject to some form of sexual harassment (El Deeb, 2013). However, some legislative progress can be observed. In 2017, the Tunisian parliament adopted a law to prevent and tackle violence against women, while in Egypt a law criminalising sexual harassment was passed in 2014. However, their application remains limited and abuses persist. Today, in the wake of the #MeToo movement, we are seeing a commendable liberalisation of the voices of survivors of sexual violence in a number of the region's countries. In Tunisia, for example, since the end of 2019, women have started sharing their stories online under the #EnaZeda hashtag. In Egypt, similarly documented stories have led to the arrest of five men accused of gang rape in August 2020, and resulted in a law adopted by parliament to protect the identity of survivors who report sexual harassment and assault (BBC News, 2020). However, six witnesses of this rape were

subsequently arrested on charges of lewdness and drug use and some were detained for months, thereby dissuading the survivors of such violence from going to court (Saleh, 2021).

36. Socio-economic disparities between women and men remain sizable in the region. The average economic activity rate of women is 19 percentage points lower than the world average (28.3% compared to 47.7%). The Gulf countries (notably Saudi Arabia and Oman) and states marked by violence (such as Yemen, Iraq and Syria) have the highest participation gaps between women and men (International Labour Organisation, 2021). The COVID-19 crisis will likely exacerbate these already existing gender inequalities. The pandemic and its socio-economic consequences are especially damaging to women, not least because of their high level of involvement in the informal sector, which does not offer such social protections as unemployment and health insurance (OECD, 2020). Nearly 700,000 women across the region currently face income insecurity (UN Women, 2020).

37. The participation of women in politics remains low in the region. On average, women only occupy 10.4% of legislative positions, compared to 24.3% worldwide (Danon and Collins, 2020). For instance, women only hold 1.5% of parliamentary seats in Kuwait and 4.7% in Lebanon (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2021). One reason behind these low figures is enduring social expectations based on gender. Sixty-seven per cent of respondents in 12 of the region's countries surveyed in 2019 stated that they believe men make better leaders (Arab Barometer, 2019a). To remedy this lack of women's representation, eight of the region's countries have introduced quotas. In Tunisia, for example, the electoral law obliges political parties to submit lists of candidates alternating between men and women for the legislative elections. This did not prevent a drop in the proportion of women elected to parliament in the 2019 elections (26.73%, compared to 36.57% in 2014) (Marsad Majles, 2021). Despite this widespread lack of formal representation, women's participation in civil society has increased over the past decade. In Lebanon, Iraq and Sudan, for instance, women have been at the frontline of protest movements since 2019. In Lebanon, feminist organisations have also organised special events in defence of women's rights in recent years (Civicus, 2020b).

38. Finally, the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda remains limited. First of all, women are marginalised in conflict resolution in the region (contrary to the objectives of the first pillar of the WPS agenda, i.e., participation). In Libya, for instance, women were not included in the peace talks conducted so far (Burchfield, 2019), and they were similarly largely left out of the consultations in Syria and Yemen. Secondly, the situation concerning the prevention of and protection from violence against women (the second and third pillars of the WPS agenda, respectively) has deteriorated over the past decade. Conflict-related sexual violence has been well documented in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen. Most notably, in the territories under its control between 2014 and 2019 in Iraq and Syria, ISIL employed sexual violence and slavery against women – including Yazidi women – as a combat strategy (OHCHR, 2016). Lastly, the conflicts in the region pose unique challenges for women in the area of rehabilitation (the fourth pillar of the WPS agenda). Women are thus the primary victims of violence-induced displacement. For example, the United Nations estimates that 80% of internally displaced persons in Syria are women and children (UNFPA, 2020).



Source: [Research service of the US Congress](#)

A. MOROCCO

39. In 2011, women were on the frontlines of the protests organised by the “February 20” Movement. They pushed for democratic reforms, including on women’s rights. These demands have allowed some progress to be made. Specifically, Morocco withdrew its objections to several articles of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. And in 2011, a constitutional reform was adopted, enshrining the principle of equality between women and men (IFHR, 2012).

40. Despite these advances, the Moroccan legal framework offers only limited protection for women’s human rights. While the Constitution includes provisions to increase women’s participation in decision-making bodies, the electoral law sets the minimum quota for women’s representation at only 15%. Moreover, while the Family Code (Moudawana) sets the age of marriage at 18, judges can grant exemptions to girls as young as 15. In 2018, almost 20% of all registered marriages were subject to exemption (about 40,000 marriages) (Human Rights Watch, 2021b). In a similar vein, a law passed in 2018 criminalises some forms of domestic violence, but the victims must initiate criminal proceedings to receive protection. According to the Ministry of the Family (Ministry of Solidarity, Women, Family and Social Development), while 54.4% of Moroccan women were subjected to violence in 2019, only 6.6% of them filed a complaint against their aggressor, often for fear of social exclusion (Ollivier, 2020).

41. Yet women’s voices seem to be gaining strength in the face of injustice. Namely, a movement to expose sexual violence has recently emerged. The initiative is supported in large part by a group formed in 2018, the Masaktach (“I will not be silent”), which collects and publishes anonymous testimonials on its Facebook page with the aim of denouncing rape culture and acts of violence against women. Together with the media coverage of several cases, these publications have helped to bring these issues into the public debate. Hopefully, this will contribute to real social awareness and concrete legislative breakthroughs around these issues.

B. SAUDI ARABIA

42. Women in Saudi Arabia took part in the 2011-2012 protests. They demanded their basic rights, in particular the rights to vote and to move independently. Their protests were heavily repressed. However, over the past decade, their demands have prompted the authorities to begin a timid process to improve the status of women in the country. In 2011, women were granted the right to vote. In 2013, women’s participation in the Advisory Council was extended. Since 2017, they are allowed to drive and travel without the permission of a male legal guardian. Furthermore,

while the legal system historically discouraged the participation of women in the economy, the Saudi authorities have recently started to encourage women to work (World Bank, 2020). In 2019, there were more women than men entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabia (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2020).

43. However, women's rights are still largely restricted in the country. Women's rights activists face unacceptable repression. For example, in December 2020, female activists Loujain al-Hathloul and Mayaa al-Zahrani were sentenced to over five years' imprisonment for their demands for the right to drive, although this right had been recognised in 2018 (Zerrouky, 2020). Loujain al-Hathloul has since been conditionally released in February 2021 (Chulov, 2021). But on 10 March, an appeal court confirmed her sentence of five years and eight months in prison, including three years on parole, and a five-year travel ban (Le Point, 2021). Meanwhile, Mayaa al-Zahrani and other activists, such as Samar Badawi, Nassima al-Sadah, and Nouf Abdelaziz, remain in prison, while some, who were temporarily released in 2019, are still subject to judicial harassment campaigns (IFHR, 2021). Despite the minor improvements listed above, women are still subject to legal discrimination. They still need permission from a male guardian to marry, leave prison, or have access to certain forms of health care (Human Rights Watch, 2021c). In this respect, the Georgetown Institute's WPS Index placed the country last in its global ranking in 2019 (GIWPS, 2020).

V. A YOUTH TORN BETWEEN THE DESIRE TO RUN AWAY AND THE WILL TO CARRY ON FIGHTING FOR REAL CHANGE

44. Young people played a pivotal role in the 2011-2012 uprisings, expressing their frustration with the socio-economic and political situation through waves of activism and protest. Ten years on, their hopes have been largely dashed, and the lack of opportunities and discontent that sparked the 2011-2012 demonstrations persist, if they have not worsened. But high levels of youth participation in movements since 2019 shows that the demands for change and political and social involvement that emerged ten years ago are still alive today. In Lebanon, Algeria, Iraq, and Sudan, more than 80% of young people support the 2019 protests (Arab Youth Survey, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic intensifies these trends and frustrations by destroying local economies, reinforcing the repressive tendencies of the authorities and thus worsening an already precarious situation for most young people.

45. During the Arab uprisings, young people had found a voice in a new and informal type of activism that is still very much alive today. In 2011-2012, youth activism did not emerge through the traditional structures of political parties and civil society organisations, which were considered unfit to offer a path to change (POMEPS, 2019). Instead, young people voiced their distress on social media. The latter provided this marginalised generation with a new platform to communicate and organise (Monshipouri, 2019). These then emergent forms of activism can still be seen in recent campaigns. But the demands of the young protesters have changed. Their activism is mostly based on socio-economic goals, rather than political objectives.

46. The difficulties faced by young people in MENA that led to the 2011-2012 uprisings are still ongoing, or have even worsened since. In 2011-2012, rampant unemployment was a major source of frustration among young people and the issue is still unresolved today. The COVID-19 pandemic has severely hit the region. While an essential source of employment and income, tourism has almost completely stopped. According to the ILO, these countries have lost almost 17 million jobs in the second quarter of 2020 and unemployment is reported to have more than doubled as a consequence of the pandemic. Yet the MENA region is currently in the midst of a demographic boom. Two thirds of the population is under the age of 35 (Bjerde, 2020). The region's economies cannot meet this challenge. According to the World Bank, 300 million new jobs will be necessary by 2050 if the current patterns continue (World Bank, 2019). In 2020, 26.7% of 14 to 25-year-olds

in the region are unemployed, which is the highest rate in the world (World Bank, 2021). Heavy investments to secure access to education have failed to alleviate this problem. Indeed, MENA is the only area in the world where the risk of unemployment rises with the level of education (Bjerde, 2020). Young people are also increasingly frustrated with the growing corruption in the region. For example, 77% of youths believe that their government is corrupt (Arab Youth Survey, 2020). This persisting lack of opportunities and good governance strengthens the sense of disillusionment among young people in the wake of the optimism felt in 2011-2012. Young people neither trust in the capacities of the current system nor in the political elites. As two experts on the region, Dr Luis Martinez and Dr Maha Yahya, elaborated in a NATO Parliamentary Assembly webinar on 18 March 2021 entitled "A Decade after the Arab Uprisings: Lessons and Implications", the failure of the region's governments to meet the socio-economic expectations of the populations is leading towards a progressive disillusionment with democracy, particularly among young people (NATO PA, 2021). In 2018-2019, only 32% of the region's youth indicated that they trusted their government, which is a sharp drop compared to the post-revolutionary period (44% in 2012-2014) (Jamal et al., 2020). This distrust is reflected in the movements since 2019 and indicates the lack of progress made since 2011.

47. The consequences of youth disillusionment reverberate across the MENA region and beyond. First of all, young people are more likely to emigrate because of the lack of opportunities in their country. Thus, 42% of the region's youth report that they have thought of leaving their country (Arab Youth Survey, 2020). Most migration is internal to the region. When they move outside the region, they tend to be defined by historical and linguistic connections. However, the possibilities of virtual mobility afforded by the Internet, tighter border controls and the high cost of migration dampen this momentum. Secondly, a segment of the disaffected youth is also turning to the informal economy, particularly trafficking and smuggling (Blaise, 2020). Finally, in addition to other complex factors, the frustration and marginalisation of young people can drive them towards radicalisation. In this respect, the return of Jihadi fighters from Syria and Iraq jeopardises the stability of the region's countries, and beyond that, their northern and southern neighbours.

A. IRAQ

48. In Iraq – as in the rest of the region – young people are frustrated by the authorities' failure to provide for their basic needs. More than 60% of the population is under 25, making it one of the youngest countries in the world (O'Driscoll et al., 2020.). More than one million young people enter the labour market every year. Yet there are few opportunities and 25.1% of 15 to 24-year-olds are unemployed (World Bank, 2021). Rampant corruption and the absence of trust in the political system are also factors driving people against the authorities. As such, only 16% of Iraqis are satisfied with the government's performance, and the perceived level of corruption is among the highest in the region (Arab Barometer, 2019b).

49. Since 2019, this frustration has translated into the rejection of traditional forms of activism, as well as an increased participation of young people in protests. For example, only 44% of Iraqis voted in 2018, which is 18 points lower than in 2014 (Al Jazeera, 2018). Similarly, only 26% of young people claimed to be interested in politics in 2019, compared to 52% in 2011 (Arab Barometer, 2019b). Despite the excessive repression of the authorities, since 2019, young people have been taking to the streets and engaging in more informal forms of activism to make their voices heard, particularly in Shia-majority areas. Through decentralised and spontaneous demonstrations, they demand greater respect for their constitutional rights and the provision of basic social services (Bobseine, 2019).

B. ALGERIA

50. In Algeria, young people are at the forefront of the Hirak Movement that rocked the country during the so-called “Revolution of Smiles” in 2019-2020. The implication of young people in this popular movement is largely due to their political and socio-economic marginalisation. The same patterns affecting the MENA region as a whole also apply to Algeria, i.e. an inability to manage a demographic boom, leading in turn to a lack of opportunities for young people. More than two thirds of the Algerian population is under 30 years of age, and the unemployment rate for 15 to 24-year-olds was at 29.6% in 2020 (Burke and Michaelson, 2019; World Bank, 2021).

51. In 2011-2012, the Algerian population was still traumatised by the 1990s decade of violence and was largely unwilling to take the risk of changing the system. By contrast, in 2019, a new generation of youth, more in touch with the outside world and liberated from the fears of the past, is ready to make its voice heard. Young people – and particularly students – thus rallied when Abdelaziz Bouteflika announced his intention to run for a fifth presidential term, in spite of his fragile health and the discontent over his mismanagement of the country (Farrand, 2021). The movement obtained results with the resignation of Bouteflika and the arrest of several members of the administration. However, despite Bouteflika's departure, the fundamental causes of the protests remain unresolved to this day. A constitutional review in November 2020 did not meet the protesters' demands. During the referendum on its adoption, only 23.7% of Algerians turned out to vote, which illustrates the continued discontent of the population, especially amongst young people (El Kadi, 2020).

52. In early 2020, the pandemic slowed down the Hirak Movement and also worsened the socio-economic situation of the country's youth. In February, two years after the beginning of the movement, there were calls for a return to protest in favour of a deeper political change, especially among the youth (Farrand, 2021).

VI. CIVILIAN-MILITARY RELATIONS AND THE CHALLENGING DEMOCRATIC SUPERVISION OF THE DEFENCE AND SECURITY SECTOR

53. The armed forces and security services played a decisive role in the 2011-2012 uprisings. Since then, they have become more prominent in many countries' political systems. Effective democratic supervision of the defence and security sector seems difficult to achieve. Since 2019, the armed forces have once again heavily impacted the conduct and outcomes of the protests in Algeria, Lebanon, Sudan, Egypt, and Iraq.

54. These dynamics predate the Arab uprisings of 2011-2012. The armed forces and security services have exercised a strong political influence in the countries of the region since the 1950s and 1960s, when they played a major role in the national independence processes. The popularity they gained from this enabled them to consolidate their power and take part in the period of socio-economic development over the following decades, while regularly interfering in the political arena (Gaub, 2016).

55. During the 2011-2012 revolutions, both the military and the security services assumed a prominent role once again. When they supported ruling regimes and contributed to repression, the status quo was maintained, sometimes at the cost of a deadly conflict. Despite the defection of Sunni soldiers from the lower ranks of the Syrian army in the first years of the conflict, the continuous support of the majority of the army allowed Bashar al-Assad to stay in power (Alam, 2016).

In Bahrain, by maintaining the support of the army and the domestic security forces, and with the help of the forces of Saudi Arabia and other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the Sunni royal family managed to suppress the protests driven primarily by the Shia majority

(Gause, 2013). In both Egypt and Tunisia, the armed forces were unwilling to quell the protests with violence and instead facilitated the departure of the leaders. Finally, in Yemen and Libya, the armed forces split, particularly along tribal lines, between supporters of the regime and its opponents, which contributed to engulfing these countries in violence.

56. Following the 2011-2012 uprisings, the actors of the defence and security sectors have retained – and even increased – their influence in the political life of a number of countries in the MENA region. The weakness of both democratic and civic institutions, the prolonged conflicts that emerged from the 2011-2012 revolutions, the proliferation of militias, and the continuing threat of jihadism all contributed to an increase in the political role of the armed forces (Ardemagni, 2020). The disputes shaking up several countries in the region since 2019 did not significantly change the situation. Whereas demonstrators often called for increased democratic control of the defence and security sector, the military and security services have remained in control of the outcomes of movements. In Algeria for example, they refused to use any kind of force against demonstrators calling for the departure of President Bouteflika. However, the army steered the democratic transition and intervened in the arrest of the regime's allies, while trying to secure its political influence as well as its judicial and financial interests (Ghanem, 2020). In Iraq, the military and security forces have shown excessive violence in repressing dissent (Amnesty International, 2020c).

57. The COVID-19 pandemic fortifies the central role of the armed forces and security services in many countries' domestic affairs. Indeed, they play a pivotal role in implementing health measures by providing health services and enforcing containment measures. Their involvement in the response to the pandemic raises concerns that they might exploit emergency measures to consolidate their power (Ardemagni, 2020). The pandemic has also directly affected the NATO Mission in Iraq (NMI) forcing the Alliance to temporarily reduce its activities in 2020. Some of these activities directly concern the democratic scrutiny of security forces. By delivering training on the rule of law, the law of armed conflict, anti-corruption, the protection of civilians and the WPS programme, the NMI contributes to the development of more sustainable, transparent, inclusive and effective security institutions and structures.

A. SUDAN

58. In Sudan, the armed forces have traditionally adopted an interventionist stance in political crises. Through its implication in political affairs in the last decades, the army has mainly sought to preserve its economic interests and retain its control over the country's important strategic resources (Berridge, 2019). In April 2019, these same patterns prompted the armed forces to side with protesters demanding an end to Omar al-Bashir's regime. The newly created Transitional Military Council (TMC) composed of the army, security services and a paramilitary group subsequently agreed to share power with civilians. But the civilian opposition called for an early transfer of power to civilians and kept demonstrating. Fearful of prosecution for their past actions and of losing future leverage and privileges, on 3 June 2019, the security forces attacked and killed protesters (Amnesty International, 2020d). Despite the reprisal, the population is still mobilised and rejects the military regime. Facing popular pressure, in August 2019 the armed forces signed an Interim Constitutional Declaration that included a Transitional Government Agreement. The latter enables the establishment of a Sovereign Council whose composition includes members of the TMC and civilian representatives. A technocratic government made up of civilians and headed by Prime Minister Hamdok is also established and is subordinate to it. The Sovereign Council is intended to govern the country during a three-year transition period until the democratic elections in 2022. A military officer heads the Council for the first 21 months and is then replaced by a civilian for the remainder of the transition period. This is a positive step that should allow democratically elected civilian authorities to exert full control over the defence and security sectors.

59. But the nature of civil-military relations in post-Bashir Sudan remains largely unclear and is a source of great tension. There are still doubts as to whether the military is really committed to transferring the reins of power to civilians. Furthermore, the members of the CMT officially agreed to an independent investigation into the 3 June 2019 massacre, but it is unclear whether they are prepared to accept the findings if these prove incriminating (Ghanem, 2020). Moreover, in the absence of an agreement between civilians and the armed forces, the establishment of a Transitional Legislative Council (which was supposed to take place within three months of the signing of the agreement) has not happened yet, and the country continues to function without a Constitutional Court since April 2019. In October 2020, the signing of the Sudanese Peace Agreement in Juba on 3 October 2020 between the transitional government and the majority of the armed groups operating in Sudan's conflict zones (mainly Darfur, Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile) grants greater political representation to these groups and also prolongs the transitional period until 2023. The agreement also foresees the formation of a single, representative, professional national army, which is an opportunity to reform the Sudanese defence and security sector and bring it under the permanent democratic control of elected institutions (Marsden, 2020).

B. EGYPT

60. The Egyptian armed forces played a fundamental role in the success of the 2011 revolution. Initially loyal to Hosni Mubarak's regime, the armed forces eventually pushed the president out of office and did not resort to violence against demonstrators. They temporarily suspended the country's civil institutions and governed the country during a transitional period. Following the democratic election of Islamist Mohamed Morsi as President in 2012, the army conceded power. But its shadow still looms over Egyptian politics. In July 2013, the government was confronted with protests over economic and social difficulties. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces then decided to arrest President Morsi and a number of members of the Muslim Brotherhood.

61. By 2014, the military was back in power, and the democratic interlude was over. In June, former defence minister Abdel Fattah al-Sissi was elected President (with 96% of the votes, for 47% of the participation). He was re-elected in 2018 (with 97% of the votes, for 38% of the participation) and pushed through a referendum in 2019 to adopt a constitutional reform broadening the powers of the presidency and the army. The reform specifically lengthens Abdel Fattah al-Sissi's presidential term until 2024, which could enable him to remain in power until 2030 if he is re-elected. The reform also gives the president the power to appoint judges at the highest level and grants military courts broader jurisdiction to prosecute civilians.

62. Moreover, a constitutional amendment empowers the military to assert its own interpretation of the "national interest", thus allowing it to force its will on other institutions (Mandour, 2019). The military and security forces viciously repress any attempt to challenge their stranglehold on the country's governance. More than 4,000 people have thus been arrested (Repucci, 2020). The authorities also instrumentalise the COVID-19 pandemic to bolster the authority of the armed forces and security services (Human Rights Watch, 2020c). In April 2020, the state of emergency law was reformulated to give the military the power to arrest citizens, expand its judicial prerogatives, and further empower the president (Khalid, 2020). As a result, over the last decade, the army has regained control of the state and is still dragging Egypt further away from the democratic ideals that inspired the 2011 revolution.

VII. PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

63. In the ten years since the 2011-2012 uprisings, the populations of MENA countries have alternately felt intense hope and frustrated disillusionment with the democratisation process and respect for fundamental rights. In some areas – such as respect for women's rights and their involvement in the civic space, the development of a more informal civil society, and the empowerment of young people – there have been positive changes in several countries. Yet, these changes remain insufficient and fragile. In other aspects, such as the democratic control of the army and security services, as well as freedom of Assembly, Association and Expression and freedom of the press, retrograde patterns seem to have taken over most countries in the region after a brief period of hope in the wake of the uprisings. Such patterns are even more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, which serves as a pretext for more repression in several countries. However, these patterns face new surges of popular protest.

64. In many ways, the 2011-2012 revolutions never properly ended. The uprisings of a decade ago were merely the first indication of the region's citizens' deep-seated unease about the stagnation or regression of their socio-economic conditions, and also about the lack of respect for their fundamental and democratic rights. This feeling has only been exacerbated by the repressive inclinations experienced in most of the region's countries since. Thus, the demonstrations that broke out in several countries since 2019 indicate that the democratisation process of MENA societies is still ongoing. Hopes to restructure these societies with greater equity and respect for democratic and liberal values – and thus to overcome the disillusionments that marked the post-revolutionary period – remains alive.

65. Allied democracies have a responsibility to support the states of the region as they move towards democracy. In this respect, it would be desirable for NATO and its members to keep building up a common expertise of the region, including by strengthening dialogue with partner countries. The Allies should also lend tangible support to the civil society of the region. It is also imperative that they keep respect for democratic values, human rights, gender equality, and freedom of expression and of the press at the very core of their relations with the region's national authorities. Lastly, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly has a decisive role to play in facilitating the inter-parliamentary dialogue between the Euro-Atlantic area and its southern shore, particularly through the Mediterranean and Middle East Special Group (GSM).

66. The Euro-Atlantic community must actively support the countries of the MENA region in their response to satisfy their populations' democratic expectations. Indeed, the democratic aspirations of these populations coincide with the democratic values and principles on which our Alliance is founded. Nevertheless, it is of crucial importance to avoid the pitfalls of interference and arrogance. The Allies and NATO must address the region modestly and with humility. To be successful in the long term, the democratisation processes in the MENA countries must be driven by and for the people of the region.

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