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MANAGING EXITS
FROM ARMED CONFLICT

MEAC RESEARCH INTO ACTION

In Search of a Middle East and North Africa Peace System

DR. ARIEL I. AHRAM

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Background

About MEAC

UNIDIR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) is a multi-year collaboration that examines why and how individuals exit armed groups and sustainably reintegrate into civilian life. Employing multi-method longitudinal studies that follow the trajectories of former armed group affiliates and their non-associate peers across six countries, MEAC seeks to inform evidence-based prevention and reintegration programming. MEAC benefits from support from the German Federal Foreign Office; Global Affairs Canada; the Swiss FDFA; and the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs; UNICEF; and is run in partnership with IOM; UNDP; DPO; the World Bank, and the United Nations University Centre for Policy Research (UNU-CPR).

About this Series

MEAC produces a series of short publications aimed at policymakers and practitioners to highlight key findings but recognizes that there is relevant research on the subject that may remain inaccessible to them. In an effort to make these studies, which are often highly technical and/or sit behind academic journal paywalls, accessible to decision-makers and to connect them to the evidence base MEAC is creating, UNIDIR has introduced this interview series. In this series, MEAC takes the role of an interlocutor, bridging the gap between academic research and practical application by presenting brief interviews with scholars on pertinent topics. What follows is a short, digestible dialogue around the main findings of a recent study and their policy and practical implications for those working to prevent and respond to political violence and armed conflict.

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[1] **Dr Ariel I. Ahram** is a Professor and Program Chair for Government and International Affairs at the Virginia Tech School of Public and International Affairs in Arlington. He is the author, among other works, of *War and Conflict in the Middle East and North Africa*. The article discussed in this interview is available here.

Overview

While much has been written about the causes of war in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), few people consider the factors that dampen conflict, avert war, and prevent violence in the region. Tragically, war today is ubiquitous across the region. Attempts to explain MENA conflicts by examining so-called root causes like ethnic division (within countries and between them), imperialism and foreign interventions, and natural resources, especially oil and gas,[2] are ultimately unpersuasive or insufficient for a number of reasons. First, because not all these factors are present in every MENA conflict. Secondly, because these factors are present in other regions that don't suffer the same intensity or frequency of violent conflict. For much of the second half of the twentieth century, the global epicenter of war was in eastern and southeastern Asia, not MENA. Finally, because these factors are more or less static, which means that can't account for when wars abate, and peace arises. We need an approach that explains why MENA's wars begin and persist, but also why and how they abate or end.

To understand war in MENA, I suggest looking at the operation and limitations of the region's peace systems and how the region's conflicts are resolved, mitigated, and managed. A peace system comprised of institutions and systems from hyper-local to regional organizations, sometimes connected, but often not, that work to mitigate, defuse, and diminish conflict. Peace systems operate at multiple levels: a regional/international peace system involves regional and international organizations and state-to-state relations, as discussed through diplomacy and at summits. A state-level peace system involves the organs maintaining domestic peace, usually the army, police, and judiciary. The state is typically the most important bulwark of peace. But states are also capable of using the army and police to Inflict massive violence on their own populations. Finally, at the local level, some peace systems are often informal ways to resolve conflicts among neighbours. These often involve non-state figures—religious and tribal leaders, business magnates, elders, and youth activists—who take conflict resolution functions. Peace systems at different levels overlap and interact, sometimes in ways that are complementary, and sometimes at odds with each.

In MENA, these overlapping peace systems have a number of deficiencies. The Arab League, the primary regional organization, has limited mandates and capabilities for peace making compared to comparable regional organizations like the African Union or the Organization of American States, for instance. The League lacks a comprehensive architecture, leaving out

[2] For an example of the work on oil, see Michael T. Klare, *Resource wars: The New Landscape of Global Conflict*, (Owl Books, New York, 2001). For an example of work on the "ethnic security dilemma," see Shiping Tang, "The security dilemma and ethnic conflict: toward a dynamic and integrative theory of ethnic conflict," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 2, (2011).

important regional players, such as Turkey, Israel, and Iran. The US and other outside powers have played sporadic - and often convoluted – roles in regional peace-making. At the state level, MENA has perhaps the largest concentration of authoritarian regimes in the world. These types of regimes can only deter violent actors but without offering their own citizens a true voice or empowerment. This is a type of negative peace that requires marginalization and domination. It often proves unstable. Finally, at the local level, initiatives for peace are visible in many countries, especially in the civil wars of Syria, Yemen, and Libya. However, these local initiatives are often at odds with state-led initiatives that aim to consolidate and centralize power. Many peace agreements for national reconciliation actually undercut or supplant local arrangements that had developed concurrently/previously to manage conflicts at the local level. Understanding the gaps and inconsistencies within the MENA peace system can help devise a more realistic and feasible approach to conflict resolution rather than abstract and idealistic but ultimately impractical courses of action.

Interview

1. Despite starting the paper with a seemingly pessimistic view that 'searching for peace in MENA could seem fanciful,' you conclude on a hopeful note that 'peace persists among neighbours, even in deeply divided cities.' For readers who similarly feel discouraged about the prospects for peacebuilding and disarmament today given the wars in Gaza and Ukraine, what evidence-based optimism can you share with policymakers and practitioners?

In my twenty-five years working in and on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), optimism is rare and fleeting. When I was in college in 1999, I took a bus from Cairo to Tel Aviv. We drove past Bedouin villages in Sinai. We entered Gaza through the Rafah gate. We passed Palestinian towns and refugee camps, Israeli settlements, and more fortified checkpoints. We crossed the border on foot. Another bus idled on the far side of the checkpoint to take us to Tel Aviv. Even at the time, people warned me that the trip was dangerous. Really, it was just long, hot, and tiring. I dutifully found an internet café to report my safe arrival. While there certainly was a lot of violence in the region in 1999, in hindsight, this trip was a kind of glimpse into the possibilities of peace. What convinced two tour companies to collaborate to set up this kind of journey? What had happened to allow this local exchange across borders and zones of control?

MENA today is suffering some of the most intense, expansive, and prolonged incidences of violent conflict in the world. The Rafah crossing is one of the true epicentres of this violence.

But the region has not always been this violent. Indeed, through much of the second half of the 20th century, other regions have seen far larger and more protracted conflicts. Violence, in this sense, is not inevitable or perpetual in MENA. Moreover, considering how many potential flashpoints exist, there are as they say, 'many dogs that don't bark.' A direct large-scale confrontation between Israel and Iran or between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which many have expected for years, has so far been avoided, despite countless exchanges of fire, drone strikes, proxy battles, cyberwarfare, and assassinations, all of which could have led to massive violence. This could not be just good luck, in my opinion. There must be some factor working to buffer or dampen conflict and avert war. My last book was called *War and Conflict in the Middle East and North Africa*. There was a lot to write about, unfortunately. As I finished, I decided that my last chapter would consider the possibilities of peace, not just focus on the inevitability of war.

2. Your paper navigates through various traditional explanations for MENA's frequent conflicts, suggesting that existing narratives only tell part of the story. Could you unpack this a bit for us? What key elements do you think are often overlooked or underestimated in mainstream discussions about the causes of conflict in the region?

People tend to simplify, to look for one or a few root causes to explain the region's conflict propensity. The common list includes ethnic divisions (both within countries and between states in the region), imperialism and foreign meddling, and natural resources, especially oil. On close inspection, though, all of these purported root causes offer at best partial - and often times superficial - explanations.

First, because not all these factors are present in every conflict. Secondly, because these factors are present in other regions that don't suffer the same intensity or frequency of violent conflict. Thirdly, because these factors are more or less static, which means that can't account for when wars abate, and peace arises. Focusing on these causes yields a false sense of confidence about what is "wrong" with MENA. It also reinforces the presumption that problems are unsolvable, and the region is doomed. It is important to remember that for much of the second half of the twentieth century, the global epicenter of war was in eastern and south-eastern Asia, not MENA. These regions, witnessed an abatement in conflict, while MENA saw acceleration.

Large-scale violent conflict is a complex process involving multiple triggers and reinforcing mechanisms. Equally, the factors pushing against conflict in MENA are more substantial than people realize. The political scientist David Laitin observed that even in the most deeply divided

and disputed communities—think of Kirkuk, Beirut, or Jerusalem—peace by and large prevails. Very few people want violence.[3] They have too much invested in day-to-day peace. They want to earn a living and go to school. They want their family to live in safety. Violence is inherently unpredictable and difficult to contain once it starts. People therefore adopt tricks to avoid it. This "everyday peace", as peace scholar Roger Mac Ginty calls it, can be banal, undignified, and unglamorous.[4] But it is peace, nonetheless. People find everyday peace by dissimulating their feelings about others, by compromising, by taking pains not to offend, and even more, by making an effort not to take offence. Any account of MENA's horrible violence should equally be able to account for its surprising moments of peace.

3. You propose a fascinating concept of a regional peace system in MENA that operates on various levels, from high-level diplomacy to local peace efforts, dealing with conflicts of multiple kinds. Could you give us a condensed overview of how this system works, encompassing both its formal and informal mechanisms, and why it's pivotal in understanding both conflict and peace in the region?

A peace system is an institutionalized system that tries to mitigate and dampen conflict to avert escalation to violence. There are multiple peace systems operating at multiple levels. At the upper level, the UN and regional organizations like the Arab League have explicit mandates to preserve peace. They initiate diplomatic meetings and mediations. In some world regions, the concert of the UN and regional organizations like the African Union or the Organization of American States have contributed to an appreciable turn toward peace. In MENA, however, the functions and capabilities of the Arab League are far more limited. The League has historically deferred to the UN on matters of maintaining peace and has taken its own steps for peace-keeping or other actions. Moreover, the Arab League's architecture is not inclusive and leaves out important regional players like Turkey, Israel, and Iran.

The most impactful peace systems operate at the domestic or state level. Ultimately, the state's police, military, and judiciary have the biggest impact on maintaining peace. It is important to note that peace systems are not necessarily democratic. Authoritarian regimes maintain peace by enforcing one party or group's dominance over another. People surrender their freedom and get stability in return. This idea is familiar to anyone who has read Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*. But it is not too dissimilar to the medieval Islamic historian Ibn Khaldun, who observed that " Mutual aggression of people in towns and cities is averted by the authorities and the

[3] David Laitin, *Nations, States, and Violence*, (Oxford University Press, 2007).
[4] Roger Mac Ginty, "Everyday peace: Bottom-up and local agency in conflict-affected societies," *Security Dialogue,* Vol. 45, No. 6 (2014).

governments, which hold back the masses under their control from attacks and aggression upon each other. They are thus prevented by the influence of force and government authority from mutual injustice, save such injustice as comes from the ruler..."[5] At the lowest, local levels, the peace systems entail efforts to resolve conflicts and avert violence between neighbours and even within households.

Peace systems have both formal and informal institutional components. Track 2 diplomacy is one example of informal meetings that often arise to deal with one specific conflict. At the local level, mediation by elders, tribal or religious leaders, business elites, etc., while lacking formal legal status, nevertheless operates to contain and mitigate conflict.

Modern peace scholars like Christian Davenport, Patrick Regan, and Erik Melander[6] distinguish between different forms and the quality of peace. The peace of authoritarian domination is decidedly negative. But it is not nothing. Positive peace, on the other hand, comes through empowerment and inclusion, not suppression. This is an important distinction because different elements of the peace system deliver different kinds of peace. One of the clearest findings in my research is that peace can and does exist in the Middle East, but it often takes a negative form, delivered by threat and repression. This is a tragic paradox.

4. How is your model being tested in the current conflict between Hamas and Israel, and are there any aspects that may require adjustments?

Much of the paper was composed before the latest war in Gaza, but it was written with the unfortunate knowledge that future clashes were likely and with the background of the previous rounds of violence. The Gaza war shows how powerful the drive to violence is. At multiple points, the leadership of Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis, Iran, and Israel, among other actors, have made deliberate decisions to intensify violence. They chose violence because the situational incentives for violence were stronger than any payoff for peace. But this is not always the case. The peace system operates alongside the system of violence. In a more negative sense, peace systems work by reinforcing the logics of deterrence, making aggression too risky. To be most effective, though, peace systems also clear lines of communication in ways that reduce insecurity and the chance of misperception that could lead to escalation. That is a large part of the shuttle diplomacy occurring in the region today in an effort to address the conflict in Gaza and its wider regional implications with mediators and envoys from the US and Arab states. Some is the apparent “backchanneling” links Israel and

[5] Ibn Khaldūn, *A selection from the Prolegomena of Ibn Khaldūn*, (No. 4. Late EJ Brill, 1905).
[6] Christian Davenport, Erik Melander, and Patrick M. Regan, *The peace continuum: What it is and how to study it*, (Oxford University Press, 2018).

the US to Iran, making up for the lack of diplomatic relations between them. Part of the peace system also involves rewarding peaceful behaviour with economic incentives, such as reconstruction aid. One indication of the effectiveness of this peace system is that the Gaza war has not (yet) spilled over and become a larger regional conflagration. Along the Israel-Lebanese border, for instance, Israel and Hezbollah are testing each other, but neither side sees a real upside to accelerating violence. The same kind of caution and quiet negotiation is evident in the Israel-Iran belligerency. Things could have become a whole lot worse, but for the operation of peace systems.

This is not a mantra for confidence or optimism. But it is not a formula for despair either. It underscores the importance of strengthening those channels and bolstering the mechanisms that seem to work against violence and the escalation of conflict.

5. Across Libya, Yemen, and Syria, you spotlight the often-overlooked contributions of ordinary people and community networks in forging 'everyday peace.' This resonates with MEAC's observations on the ground, where we've seen tribal, religious, and community leaders play critical roles in conflict mediation and peacebuilding, leveraging local influence and sometimes bypassing state efforts.[7] Could you share more insights about the unique role that local authorities and communities can play in contributing to building and maintaining peace?

States are the main bulwarks of peace, for better or worse. I began my academic career studying Iraq, where the US invasion led to utter state collapse in 2003. Non-state actors took on the enormous role of governing neighbourhoods, districts, and even whole provinces. In the 2010s, in the wake of the Arab uprisings, similar kinds of state failure occurred in Libya, Yemen, and Syria. These were regimes that were fierce and violent toward the opposition. But they were also weak and feckless, prone to internecine fighting and unable to maintain basic services for their citizens. Their collapse had enormous consequences. Many actors stepped into the vacuum. Rebel groups took up the mantle in some areas, setting up quasi-state governance apparatuses, including security services. But in many spaces, communal leaders who were functionally divorced from both the state and the rebels, stepped forward as peacemakers.

[7] For example, see: Hilary Matfess, Siobhan O'Neil, Kato Van Broeckhoven, and Mohammed Bukar, "Community Leaders' Receptivity to Returning Former Boko Haram Associates and its Impact on Peacebuilding," *MEAC Findings Report 15* (New York: United Nations University, 2022); Schadi Semnani, Jente Althuis, Muqadas Samarrai, Melisande Genat, Noor Mohammed, and Siobhan O'Neil, "Shadow Crossings: Informal Returnees from Al Hol," *Findings Report 35*, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2024; Dr. Jacqueline Parry, Yousif Khoshnaw, Siobhan O'Neil, Juan Armando Torres Munguía and Mélisande Genat. "The Road Home from Al Hol Camp: Reflections on the Iraqi Experience," *MEAC Findings Report 24,* (New York: United Nations University, 2022).

Looking across the MENA region, though, I found many researchers who were documenting the involvement of local leaders in peace at the micro-scale. I think of colleagues like Nadwa Dawsari and Stacey Philbrick Yadav, who work on Yemen,[8] Sahar Ammar working on Libya,[9] and Wendy Pearlman, Marika Sosnowksi, and Rim Turkmani in Syria.[10] Their work offers a wealth of examples in which tribal and religious leaders, local notables, business leaders, and youth activists engaged in peacebuilding. These local peacebuilders settled disputes among neighbours. They provided security. They enforced the law. They helped negotiate exchanges of prisoners, clearing battlefields of the injured and dead bodies. They also lobbied armed groups to respect human rights. They organized humanitarian relief. Some of these efforts were bolstered by training from foreign humanitarian groups. Some were more instantaneous responses to dire needs. I don't want to valorize these non-state actors too much. Few espouse liberal democratic values. Some verge on mafia-style extortionists, offering protection and safety in return for compliance. But many were also more responsive and responsible than the formal organs of government. They depended on local communities for finances, manpower, social standing, and legitimacy. This meant that local leaders could exert influence over local populations even though they would not be able to influence the behaviour of a bureaucrat appointed from the central ministry. These initiatives helped stabilize everyday peace amidst overall carnage.

The Peace Agreements Database (PA-X)[11] helped me get a view of the overall involvement of local actors in peace. PA-X is a project run by scholars at the University of Edinburgh to analyze peace agreements around the world. PA-X began operations in 2019 and its data is more or less current spanning back to 1990. PA-X identified over a hundred peace agreements signed in MENA that involved local groups. In about 40 percent of cases, local leaders initiated peace agreements without including the state at all. (Other regions, like sub-Saharan Africa, are more or less comparable in this respect). These were true bottom-up initiatives, matching local solutions to local security problems. There are certainly limits as to how far these types of arrangements can go, but they save lives.

[8] Nadwa Al-Dawsari, *Peacebuilding in the Time of War: Tribal Cease-fire and De-escalation Mechanisms in Yemen*, (Middle East Institute, 2021); Stacey Philbrick Yadav, *Yemen in the Shadow of Transition: Pursuing Justice Amid War*, (Hurst Publishers, 2022).
[9] Sahar Ammar, *National Reconciliation in Libya: Challenges and Perspectives*. (Swisspeace, 2022).
[10] Wendy Pearlman, 'Civil Action in the Syrian Conflict', in Deborah Avant, and others (eds), *Civil Action and the Dynamics of Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); Rim Turkmani, "Local agreements as a process: the example of local talks in Homs in Syria," In *Peacebuilding* Vol. 10, No. 2 (2022); Marika Sosnowski, *Redefining ceasefires: Wartime Order and Statebuilding in Syria*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023).
[11] See Bell, Christine, Sanja Badanjak, Laura Wise, Monalisa Adhikari, Juline Beaujouan, Margherita Distrotti, Tim Epple, Robert Forster, Robert Wilson, and Laura Wise (2024). PA-X Local Peace Agreements Database and Dataset, Version 5. https://pax.peaceagreements.org/agreements/lsearch

6. You call for the empowerment of grassroots entities involved in the everyday peace-making process, yet you also note a disjuncture with regional and state-level efforts. Is this tension inevitable, or are there ways to harmonize peace efforts across these different levels? Could you offer some insight into the effective integration of local, national, and regional peace-making efforts? How might the international community encourage integration and better support these critical local actors?

Linking the activities of the MENA peace system at the international, state, and local levels is an enormous challenge. I don't have any easy policy solution for harmonizing the work happening at different levels of the system. Still, thinking in this way helps remind me that peace can arrive through multiple channels. The international community is tentatively learning about the need to engage local actors in peacebuilding and not concentrate exclusively on the state. This is evident in the verbiage of UN peacekeeping missions and the activities of international humanitarian agencies and NGOs that seek out local partners. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres wrote in the preface to the 2020 UN Community Engagement Guidelines on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace that "local civil society actors, including women and youth, are often primary agents of peacebuilding, playing key roles in conflict-affected societies and in situations of extreme fragility or transition… As such, community engagement with local civil society actors is a central component of peacebuilding and sustaining peace." [12]

Codifying engagement measures into manuals and guidelines is a good first step. But there is a deeper paradox here that affects the possibilities for peacebuilding. The UN is a body comprised of Member States. It is committed to maintaining the interests and stability of these members. It is hard for Member States even to conceive of, much less countenance, measures that take power out of the hands of states and grant them to sundry local actors. But repeatedly, UN agencies, as well as the ICRC, humanitarian NGOs like MSF and Geneva Call, and others have confronted the reality that states are not always willing or able to maintain peace at the local level. Rather than waiting for strong, capable, and willing states to arrive, they have improvised tactics to engage the local leaders and empower the peace system at the local level. It is time, though, to go beyond improvisation and ad hoc responses to realize that states maybe the impediment to peace. In response, we must seek out local peace regardless of the state and international level.

[12] United Nations Peacebuilding, *United Nations Community Engagement Guidelines on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace,* (2020).

7. Along the line of synchronizing between the levels/systems— how realistic is it for local and subnational systems to operate when the state or leadership level fundamentally opposes the idea?

Authoritarian states, as in Syria, are necessarily wary of bottom-up initiatives for governance and peace-making. They will crush these initiatives if they can. That is the story of the Astana Process, a kind of peace by strangulation. But there are places where the states' writ is limited, which provides opportunities for non-state actors to play a more constructive role in peace. I think of the consolidation of the self-proclaimed Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq after 1991 or the Autonomous Areas in Northeast Syria (AANES) after 2014. Building connections between these isolated "peacelands," as political scientist Séverine Autesserre calls them, and the international peace system is key to making them sustainable.[13] It also bypasses states from the peace equation.

The international community can bolster local peace initiatives in other ways, short of carving out liberated zones. This requires a commitment to prioritize local peace over the consolidation of the central state. This means finding ways to deliver humanitarian assistance and even development aid to communities regardless of the demands of the allegedly sovereign state. It means making civilian protection a priority above elite reconciliation.

8. Lastly, your study sheds light on unique dynamics and strategies that might be universally applicable or adaptable. If you had to distil some key lessons for the international peace-building community operating beyond the MENA region, such as in the Lake Chad Basin, what would they be?

The conflicts in the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin are closely connected to the conflicts in MENA. They also share many similar conflict dynamics. For policymakers, I think the first recommendation is to avoid the trap of thinking that conflicts are static or perpetual. We talk about conflict dynamics because they are constantly moving, even if only below the surface. We should expect shifts at every level. Likewise, just as conflicts can expand and intensify, peace systems can adapt and respond. Therefore, no work toward peace is fruitless.

Second, look for peace drivers beyond the state. A strong, effective, and representative state is the best guarantor of peace yet invented. But this kind of social technology is hard to effectuate and difficult to replicate. When states are already malfunctioning, expecting them to take up the mantle of peace alone is unrealistic and actually dangerous. There has to be

[13] Séverine Autesserre, *Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention*, (Cambridge University Press, New York, 2014).

measures to cultivate non-state actors, and to build informal peace activities at other levels. This may not be to the liking of government officials, but it may be a necessary component of peace making and related interventions by international actors.

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