

Women's Lives and Agency in the MENAT-Region. Between Political Activism and Realism. Concept Note

A cooperation of Bruno Kreisky Forum for International Dialogue and Department for Security Policy, Austrian Federal Ministry of Defence

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In its report "Conflict Barometer 2021. Disputes, non-violent crises, violent crises, limited wars, wars", the Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research¹ lists 43 intra-state conflicts and wars of which ten are in the MENAT-region. Among them, countries such as Egypt, Iran, Palestine, Syria, Turkey, Tunisia and Yemen are listed. In most of the countries, the developments following the 2011 protests brought an increase in violence, conflict, political fragmentation and a rise in foreign interventions. In many war contexts, e.g. Libya, Palestine, Syria and Yemen, violence has escalated and the number of civilian casualties has increased tremendously. When in the 1970ies the Lebanese Professor Edward Azar developed the term "protracted social conflict" to explain the type of "on-going and seemingly unresolvable conflict", he took Lebanon as one example, which is still valid today. In contexts of political transition and instabilities, e.g. Egypt, Iran, Turkey and Tunisia, the level of violence is also increasing.

Many of the aforementioned countries have been undergoing political and socio-economic upheavals for years if not for decades. Lives of one generation after the other have been shaped by war, conflict and violence. The impact on women and girls has been described and highlighted in a great number of studies.

Yet, throughout the 20th century, women in the MENAT-region were continuously challenging political, socio-economic and cultural conditions and barriers. Women's political and social participation and activism has a leading role in transformation processes, protests and social movements, but also counter-movements in their respective countries. The Global Study on the Implementation of Security Council resolution 1325 published in 2000², underlines that women's participation is key to sustainable peace: „Women's participation increases the probability of a peace agreement lasting at least two years by 20 percent, and by 35 percent the probability of a peace agreement lasting 15 years. Peace agreements are 64 percent less likely to fail when civil society representatives participate. In 15 of 16 national dialogues examined, decision-making was left to a small group of male leaders.“ An analysis that has

¹ https://hiik.de/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/CoBa_2021_03.pdf

² https://wps.unwomen.org/pdf/en/globalstudy_en_web.pdf

been reiterated with regard to mediation processes by the 2022 publication of UN Women on “Women’s Participation in Local Mediation: Lessons from Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen.”³

Recognizing that the participation of women in political life is crucial for advancing democracy, good governance, transparency and equal citizenship, this workshop brings women from the MENAT-region together in order to share their analysis as well as their experiences on political participation in their respective countries. Although aims of female actors may often coincide, the methods and approaches to political participation differ significantly and are not always complementary, but occasionally antagonistic. Due to new media, it is no longer only female politicians, journalists and scientists, who have the opportunity to shape public opinion and become "agents of change", but increasingly female activists. This workshop has an interdisciplinary approach, bringing women from different disciplines, organizations and backgrounds together: political and social scientist, politicians, representatives of NGO’s and grassroots organizations and activists. As such, the event offers a platform to problematize, discuss, and think of solutions to the specific challenges women face in different national contexts, as well as with regard to the general tension between political activism and realism.

Themes:

- Underrepresentation and barriers to women's political participation.
- Experiences of women in war, protracted conflicts and political transitions in the MENAT-region.
- Participation of women in negotiations, mediation- and peace building efforts. Experiences and lessons learned.
- Women covering wars and conflicts. Narratives, methods and impact in times of social media.

³ https://arabstates.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-07/Local-Mediation-Paper_EN-1.pdf